

Out of the Frying Pan

Book IV: Into the Fire

A D&D Story Hour

Written and Compiled by Osvaldo Oyola

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Content Warning: This story contains some descriptions of gory violence and elements of horror, discussions of rape and other forms of sexual assault, and representations of fantasy racism, sexism, and derogatory language.

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“Out of the Frying Pan” – Book IV: Into the Fire... (part one)

Cast of Player Characters (in order of appearance)

- Kazrack Delver: a dwarven rune-thrower and warrior: stubborn, loyal, inscrutable.
- Ratchis of Nephthys: a half-orc cleric/ranger dedicated to an abolitionist god.
- Martin the Green: a wizard cursed to carry a necromantic artifact, destined to destroy him.
- Roland Eremicia of Bast: an urbane priest prone to boredom but seeking to glorify his goddess.
- Logan Naismith - a fighter/rogue sent by Alexandra the Lavender to aid Martin in his quest.
- Bastian Sinuhe - a Gothanian human ranger/warlock who is an outcast among his people.

Session #69

Anulem, the 14th of Ter – 565 H.E.

Kazrack, Ratchis, Martin, Gunthar, Flora, Dorn and Bones came through the gate one at a time. The dwarves looked them up and down as if to make a mental inventory of their weapons and equipment and get a good look at their faces.

The light of the nearly full moon washed over the town giving a clear view of it.

“Fascinating,” Martin murmured.

Nikar was a town of three tiers built into the side of the mountain. The tunnel led out through a gatehouse onto the central tier, which had a gradual curve to the northwest. The lower tier was about thirty feet below on the left, and the upper tier was nearly sixty feet above on the right. A natural wall of jagged rock protected the town from access from above the tunnel on the mountain face, while a severe drop-off protected from below. They could see the road that led to Nikar widened and continued beyond the town.

The central tier had a handful of tiny tree-lined streets made by white stucco houses with shale roofs. Immediately on the right was an imposing structure. It was a building surrounded by fortified walls and built into the cliff-face. It ran all the way up to an impressive round building with a central spire that matched the edge of the tier above. Narrow towers flanked the building all the way up and decorated galleries were on each level. It was among the finest dwarven stonework Kazrack had ever seen, and it was clearly a safehouse for the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium, and the building above it was the Temple of the Grandfathers.¹

They could also see a set of stone steps similar to those leading down from the cemetery leading to the upper tier. From the little of what could they see of the lower tier from where they were, it seemed more spread out, with many gardens and smaller scattered buildings with tin and zinc roofs that glistened in the moonlight.

“Weapons must be kept tied with peace-knots at all times,” the dwarf instructed them. “In fact, there is no reason to wear weapons in town at all, so best keep them and your armor locked away in your inn room, or wherever you might be staying.”

Kazrack nodded. Gunthar rolled his eyes. Bones tapped his bare foot impatiently.

“There are severe penalties for the casting of magics that compel people to do things against their will,” the dwarf looked at Martin. “That includes using charms for business deals and to get a better price in the market, and there is no summoning of any kind without express written permission of the Ruling Council. Is that all clear?”

Everyone agreed.

¹ A temple of the dwarven gods.

Ratchis led the group down a narrow alley that was in the shadow of the upper tier and to the stairs. The town was shutting down for the evening and they could see shopkeepers taking down their signs and turning down their lanterns. Most of the shops on this level looked as if they served as the shopkeepers' homes as well. They passed a cobbler, a baker, a cooper and a general store.

As they climbed the tall, partially open steps to the upper tier, more of the lowest tier became visible. There was a wooden set of steps that went down from the central tier to the lowest, but even in the moonlight they did not look to be well kept. There was a broad set of stone steps on the western side of town that marked the edge of the lowest tier. It seemed like nearly all of the western third of the lowest tier was built partially underground. They could see the lights of many-colored lanterns from down there.

"That is the gnomish quarter," Ratchis said to Martin, noticing the watch-mage had stopped to look. "Halflings live there, too. There are mines and public baths down there as well."

The party noted a dwarven guard checking in on two human guards posted at the top of the steps. They considered the party carefully, and though they did not stop them they were obviously looking to see if their weapon were knotted.

Kazrack nodded to them.

The cottages and buildings of the upper tier were much nicer and more extravagant than those below. Each cottage seemed to have a lot more land around it, and the gardens here were filled with colorful flowers. There was a great plaza at the east end of town, above the tunnel entrance to the town. The muted moonlight of Mind's Eie shone against the tall, peaked council building, with its four tall columns above marble steps. It was one point of the triangle-shaped plaza. The other two were the gray and black stone of the dwarven temple, and the caramel-colored stone and brilliant golden roof of a temple of Bast. There was a fountain in the center of the white-brick plaza.

In fact, most of the upper tier's buildings were made of white stone and brick, and the flicker of candle and lantern light and the contrast of flowers, ribbons and velvet curtains in this affluent area gave it a funereal look.

Ratchis led them up the broad front street towards a rectangular two-story inn. Smoke billowed from its chimney and music and revelry could be heard from within.

Martin read the name on the sign aloud, "The Inn of Friendly Flame." The sign's wording was carved with fiery letters and decorated with two faux jets of flame shooting out from each side, lined in gold paint.

"This is the nicest inn in town. Get rooms here," Ratchis said. "I'm going to go see my teachers, Jetta and Narcil."

"Where's the whores in this town?" Gunthar asked, putting a hand on Ratchis' shoulder to stop him. The half-orc turned and pulled away angrily.

"There are none that I know of," Ratchis sneered. "Be respectful when in this town. The last thing we need is you getting into trouble or getting us all in trouble."

"I don't want to get into trouble, but trouble just seems to find me. It's kind of a curse," Gunthar said, actually looking hurt for a moment and then smiling slyly. "The Northrop Curse, but thankfully it is balanced out by the Northrop Blessing." He wagged his eyebrows and did a small hip thrust.

"Well, at least you are consistently unpleasant," Ratchis sighed.

"I love you, too, Snuffles."

The inn was packed, as one might expect to see in many popular taverns throughout Aquerra on Anulem.² The party took a table by the hearth, while Martin the Green saw the inn-keeper about rooms.

The inn-keeper, Huggert, was a portly man, barely five and a half feet tall. Aside from white tufts on the sides, he had a shining bald head, and his wrinkled and scarred chin held a gnarled dusty gray beard. He showed Martin two reasonably priced suites they could rent by the week. The half-dwarf had one of his maid-servants fetch them mutton stew and a pitcher of ale.³ The two serving maids were built much like Huggert, squat and thick, and with the barest visible scrubby facial hair on their chins.

Back down on the central tier, Ratchis kicked the dust from his boots on the mat before a small, white-washed cottage with a thatched roof covered in pitch. Colorful sleeping flowers, and the first budding vegetables lined either side of the path off the street to the house, visible in the glow of the lit lanterns that lined the walks. The half-orc noticed one of the dwarven town guards eying him.

He knocked on the door with a big ham-fist.

The door opened suddenly.

“You are never early Ro...” The young woman that opened the door stopped and looked up from Ratchis’ chest to his face.

She wore a simple white sleeveless dress that revealed well-toned arms. Her skin was white as alabaster and her hair nearly blue black and straight; cut at chin length. She had big beautiful blue eyes and sharp handsome features like the statue of a hero or goddess. She was barely five feet seven inches tall.

Ratchis had no idea who this was.

“Uh... hello?” Ratchis said, meekly.

“...Nephthys be praised!” the woman cried, and leaped forward grabbing the ranger in a tight embrace. “You are Ratchis!”

“Um, who are you?” Ratchis choked out. He gently pulled the beautiful woman off of him.

“I’m Mercy!” she said with a smile. Ratchis could now see she wore a necklace of scored and broken chains about her neck, as it had fallen over the collar of her dress when she reached up to hug him. “I am Jetta and Narcil’s daughter. They never told you about me?”

“No.”

“I am being rude, making you stand out here. Come in!”

The cottage had one cozy room. Two lofts provided bed space flanking the comfortable padded chairs making a semi-circle around a fireplace, while another corner served as a kitchen with a small table and three simple wooden chairs surrounding. There was an iron stove there as well. Another held two cramped desks piled with books and papers, above which hung a variety of weapons and pieces of armor. Ratchis found it little changed from when he had stayed here, save for his own muddy footprints on the rug, which Jetta often chided him for affectionately.

“It is so good to finally meet you,” Mercy said, smiling and putting a teakettle on the stove. “My parents told me all about you.”

² Anulem is the only day of the week that common folks ever take off from work or work only a half-day in the afternoon (making Teflem a popular night for revelry as well).

³ Half-dwarves are exceedingly rare in Aquerra. Very few live past infancy due to disease and birth defects that are not understood. In addition, they are sterile and are often referred to in a derogatory way as ‘mules.’

“Where are Jetta and Narcil?” Ratchis asked.

“They are off on a mission in the Outlands, seeking to smash a slaving ring they got wind of working out of there,” Mercy replied, gesturing to a chair.⁴ Ratchis could smell something delicious cooking. He noticed the table was set for two. “I would be with them, but I had just returned from a sortie against the Tall Twin River Pirates of Menovia, and needed to rest after that ordeal, and they wanted me to stay behind to act as a balance to the overly-zealous law and order elements in the town’s leadership in their stead.”

“I need to ask something of you,” Ratchis said, haltingly. “I do not mean to be a rude guest, but it strikes me as odd that your parents never told me about you. As much as I hate to do it, I would like for you to consent to allow me to use one of Nephthys’ miracles to read your aura and determine your intent.” Ratchis looked down, feeling slightly ashamed, but then looked up at Mercy steadily.

“If you must,” Mercy replied. “I understand it can be hard to trust when you have seen the kinds of things those dedicated to fighting for freedom often have to see, or even seek out.”

Ratchis called to Nephthys and after a moment sighed, “I’m sorry.”

“No need to be,” Mercy said. “Now tell me, what brings you back to Nikar, from what mother and father said, I would think you would not be eager to come back.”

“Well, I was eager to see your parents,” Ratchis replied. He suddenly became very aware of his own ragged state and stammered. “But I am mainly here to gain aid and resources with my companions to overcome a great evil that grows in one of the Little Kingdoms.”

“Start from the beginning,” Mercy said.

“Well...”

There was a knock on the door.

“Oh my! I forgot I was having someone over to dinner,” Mercy cried and got up and ran to the door, throwing it open. “You are actually on time for once.”

“An error I shall endeavor to never make again,” came a playful tenor from the shadowy doorway. A slight man came in, rail-thin and with a youthful handsome baby-face, he had olive complexion, green eyes and wavy dark brown hair. He wore a long fancy waistcoat, and a ruffled white shirt and tall boots. He pulled off his velvet gloves and walked in.

“I see you have a visitor,” the man said, and stepped over to Ratchis looking him over with a fake smile that widened in lieu of wincing. Ratchis saw the man wore a silver necklace set with sapphires and a gold lion-shaped pin on his coat. He put out his hand. “I am Roland of Bast.”

Ratchis stood and put out his own hand.

“Ratchis was a student of my parents,” Mercy said.

“Friar Ratchis, is it?” Roland asked, with a tone of recognition in his voice.

“Just Ratchis will do,” the half-orc replied. There was a long awkward moment as they all stood there. Whatever was cooking on the stove gurgled.

⁴ The Outlands is a several hundred square mile frontier that takes up about a fourth of the great island. It is a place of huge monsters and warring humanoid tribes, including ogres, trolls and giants. It was immortalized by the circa 500 H.E. bard, Hemmesh, as ‘The Sea of the Land Sharks’. Recently, the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium opened a southern road along the coast to by-pass the Outlands and start trade with the towns of the Far Shore League.

“Would you mind terribly if Ratchis joined us?” Mercy said, beginning to set another place, without waiting for an answer. “Ratchis was about to tell me why he and his companions are in Nikar and about the great mission they are trying to undertake.”

Roland bowed stiffly. “Any guest of yours is a guest of mine,” Roland replied with forced graciousness. “But I do think we will need an extra bottle of wine for this kind of talk. Allow me to hurry off to the inn and purchase one or two. I shall return momentarily.”

And with that he was gone.

“Is that your betrothed?” Ratchis asked Mercy.

Mercy’s eyes widened, “Uh, no... no... Roland and I have known each other since childhood, though I had not seen him for many years until recently. He is a good man, though a bit fickle.”

Roland was back faster than Ratchis would have thought possible. He held up two bottles of the Princeton Vales⁵ and smiled.

They sat down to eat and were quiet for a while.

Ratchis looked to Roland.

“Do you live here now? Are you a resident?” Ratchis asked.

“For the moment,” Roland replied. “I have left and returned many times, but honestly, present company excepted, I am bored.”

“Don’t lie, Roland. You know you grew bored of me long ago,” Mercy chided him.

“Well, yes... That’s true,” Roland winked lasciviously at Mercy, and Ratchis frowned. “But right now, I am looking to do some good works for the glory of my goddess, Bast. Perhaps there is some aid I can give to your own efforts.”

“I am not sure how much you would like it where we are going. My companions and I face almost certain death.”

“Yes, well... Isn’t that just always the case,” Roland replied wryly, taking a long sip of wine.

“Will you take an oath on Bast that what I will tell you now will not leave this room?” Ratchis asked.

Roland made a big show of standing and placing his right hand over his heart. He held his wine glass up in the air with his left. “On my honor as a servant of Bast, goddess of cats, may all manner of felines worry my flesh and rend my eyes from their sockets if I should share any of the secrets I learn from you this day.”

Ratchis instinctively reached up to the makeshift patch covering his own destroyed eye.

“How did you lose your eye, Ratchis?” Marcy asked.

“I did not lose it. It is still there, just useless.”

“Lovely...” Roland said, sitting down and refilling his glass after another long swig.

Ratchis sighed and began to retell the tales of the Fearless Manticore Killers.

⁵ The Princeton Vales an area northwest of the Freetown of Princeton on the eastern shore of Derome-Delem known for its fine wines.

After a long night of the meandering tale, interrupted by many questions and clarifications, Mercy invited Ratchis to sleep in his old place in one of the bed lofts, while she took her parents' spot. Roland staggered out to return to the temple of Bast where he stayed, after promising to return for dinner again the next night, so that Ratchis might bring the rest of his group over to meet them both.

Ralem, the 15th of Ter – 565 H.E.

Early the next morning, Ratchis hurried back to the inn to catch the others and tell them of dinner at Mercy's that night, but Kazrack had already left.

The dwarf clutched the bag of runestones about his neck as he stood before the great door to the Temple of the Grandfathers. It held one corner of a triangular plaza that had a fountain at its center. The temple of Bast and the Town Hall made the other two points. Kazrack took in the elaborate runic carving about the doors and the impressive statues that flanked the broad steps up from the plaza and bowed his head in silent prayer. He had not been to a true temple of the dwarven gods since his early childhood.⁶

As the first lights of the day came over the mountain from the east, the doors to the temple opened and Kazrack could hear the prayer of the finest hour emanating from within; as did the warm glow of the hearth beyond the altar.⁷

Two temple guards stood in their traditional red robes and axes on either side of the antechamber. Kazrack nodded to both of them as he walked past, stopping to strike a small hammer against a steel anvil twice before he crossed the threshold into the temple proper.

He heard many voices up near the altar forge as he walked up the aisle between the rows of grooves carved into the floor where the congregation's prayer stones would be laid during a ceremony. The ceiling was adorned with circular patterns of dwarf-carved stalactites that were covered in number runes that retold the making of the world. Squat windows lined the very top of the tall walls, letting in streams of light in oblique angles that kept the place dim, though braziers lined the walls. Huge round columns held up the ceiling and created narrow corridors on either side, where the braziers were.

Kazrack slipped his own prayer stone into one of the grooves before that and knelt. He could see that an older dwarf was lecturing a group of dwarven girls, too young yet to have chin whiskers, on the forging of metal.⁸ He laid his forehead upon the smooth stone and closed his eyes in prayer.

Kazrack did not know how long he had been lost in prayer when he sensed someone standing to his left. He spoke the closing prayer and stood.⁹

"Well met, brethren," the dwarf said. He wore a simple gray robe, cinched with a leather belt with a broad brass buckle. About his neck was a pouch of rune stones, but he also had a leather thong holding flute about there as well. He had brown beard with highlights of shining red, and a shaved head. "I am Krechkar, host of the Temple of the Grandfathers. Welcome."

"Um culled Kushrak," Kazrack said, raising the back of his hand to his chin to keep his drool from spilling over to the floor of the house of worship. "Uz ooh cun tell Uh fund et dishacul tuh shpeak. Uh wut luk tuh shpek tu tuh huh preesht."

⁶ While the dwarven community in Verdun has a temple chamber they gather to pray in. It is not officially a hallowed place.

⁷ These are a series of prayers that are sung aloud upon undertaking work for the first time in the morning.

⁸ Traditional dwarven education for females includes a basic knowledge of both warcraft and metal and stone craft, as they are expected to fill a support role in times of war or disaster. Male dwarves are not typically taught any of the skills considered to be in the domain of women.

⁹ All dwarven prayers are book-ended by opening and closing lines common to all prayers that indicate what is about to be said (and what was just said) was meant for the gods alone.

“Um, I am having a hard time understanding you, brethren, but I see you are a rune-thrower, and I assume you wish to see the High Priest, Bedkorak. Follow me, and I will bring you to his Hands and Voice and see if a meeting can be set up.”¹⁰

Kazrack followed, leaving his prayer stone in its place. This was the safest place in the world for it.

Krechkar led Kazrack past the altar on the left through a small door and down some stairs to a labyrinth of subterranean rooms, though the room he was led to had a small barred window that looked out on the Central Tier and the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium Safehouse below. He could also see the gatehouse and guarded tunnel entrance to the town.

An older dwarf came in nearly an hour late.

“I am called Dalim. I am the Hands and Voice of the High Priest Bedkorak, devotee of Hodanar,” the dwarf said. He wore a simple brown robe the same color as his flowing beard, which was bright red, despite his duller brown locks. His beard had two large braids in it, one woven with silver wires. He had a bag of runestones about his neck and small golden horn at his belt. “Welcome to the Temple of the Grandfathers, Kushrack.”

“Kashrak,” Kazrack said, standing. “Uh wsuh hoping tuh she uh Eye Preesht. Uh have uh important mutter tuh dishcush wish him.”

“Perhaps you can tell me what this matter is and I can pass it on to him,” Dalim suggested.

“Ash you cun tull, Uh have difficulty shpeaking, und would rudder nut repeat myshelf,” Kazrack forced out.

Dalim hesitated. “You may have a long wait.”

“Giff him dish,” Kazrack said, and he reached into his bag and pulled out something wrapped in a cloth, and handed it to the priest.

Dalim nodded and left.

It was less than ten minutes later that he returned to lead Kazrack to the High Priest’s chambers. It was a small office, connected to a small simple alcove that served as a bedchamber. It had a low ceiling like the other rooms on this lower level, but had a small oven that served a shrine, and a large stone desk, covered with runes. Nooks in the far wall held countless stone tablets and scroll tubes.

High Priest Bedkorak stood as Kazrack walked in. He had thick white hair that flanked his round and young-looking face, and a thick white beard marbled in places by coarse black hairs. He had two round obsidian beads in his beard. He had two silver teeth on the front right side of his mouth.

“Kazrack,” Bedkorak said.

Kazrack got down on one knee and touched his forehead to the back of the High Priest’s hand. Dalim left.

Bedkorak gestured for Kazrack to take a seat next to the desk. He could see the object he had sent him lying unwrapped on the desk. It was the Hand of Natan-Ahb.¹¹ The High Priest gestured to the mithral and platinum gauntlet.

¹⁰ High Priests of the dwarven faith have one or more direct assistants that serve them in different capacities. One or more dwarves can hold any number of positions. Thus, a high priest with a small staff of immediate servants might have one servant that has the title of “Hands and Voice” of the High Priest, while another could have three servants which act as the “Hands, Voice and Eyes” of the High Priest (one for each title), or some might even have several assistants that hold the same title. These assistants are always priests of note, often holding other useful skills useful to the temple, whether it be orator, historian, bodyguard, tactician, or a myriad of others.

¹¹ The Hand of Natan-Ahb was found in the Pit of Bones (See Session #61).

“This is a great thing you bring to us,” Bedkorak said. “Its value is priceless. How did you come upon the Hand of Natan-Ahb of the great citadel lost to us in the war with the humans?”

“Muh cumpunions und Uh weredair,” Kazrack mumbled.

“Ah, yes, your wound,” the high priest said. “Dalim mentioned it. Let me call to the gods to re-knit the fractured bone.”

Bedkorak stood and walked over to Kazrack and placed one big calloused hand beneath his mangled chin and one atop his head. He spoke a long chanting prayer to Rivkanal, and Kazrack winced as his flesh healed over very quickly and the shards of jawbone moved about inside his pus-filled flesh.

Bedkorak took his seat again, and Kazrack stretched out his tight-feeling jaw and rubbed it with one hand.

“Rivkanal be praised,” Kazrack said.

The high priest smiled, and then asked his questions again, “Where did you find the Hand of Natan-Ahb of Barak-Rrin-Sonn?”¹²

“My and companions and I were there seeking the map that would show us the location of Hurgun’s Maze,” Kazrack said, trying to keep a smile off his face. It felt good to be able to speak clearly and free of pain.

Bedkorak’s eyes widened. “Hodonar bless your travels! I sense there is a long tale behind this.”

Kazrack nodded.

And so, Kazrack told the tale as best he could of his journey to Gothanius, the gnomes, Mozek, Hurgun’s Maze, and the Pit of Bones. Bedkorak asked no questions but listened silently. In the end, Kazrack added that he felt ready to uncover more of the greater mysteries of his faith and hope to gain more lore and learn more runes while he was here. Bedkorak agreed, and also agreed to allow Kazrack use of the forge to craft a suit of plate mail of exceptional quality.¹³

Finally, Kazrack had one last request.

“My companion, D’nar, his true name is... Ratchis... He lost an eye in our battle with the dark elves and I was hoping there might be some remedy for it you could provide.”

“You spoke a good deal of him in your tale, but his name... It is not dwarven, in fact it seems like it could be a name in the tongue of our enemy,” Bedkorak said.

“He is but half-man, that is the strong half, and works for the common good,” Kazrack explained.

Bedkorak sighed and shook his head. “Let his own gods deal with his wound. The greater gifts of our pantheon cannot be wasted on such as those.”

“I understand,” Kazrack replied. “As I will be spending much of my time here, I need to return to the inn and tell my companions of my plans.”

“Go and drink and make merry with you companions. Let tomorrow’s finest hour be the beginning of your work and reflection.”

¹² Barak-Rrin-Sonn roughly translates into “Shield Above Good Stone” and is the name of the citadel that sunk into what is now the Pit of Bones.

¹³ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack was ready for training to gain 3rd level spells and had some skill points to spend. He also would be crafting masterwork full plate.

After breakfast, Martin the Green made his way to the Council Hall. He climbed the broad marble steps and looked at the stylized bronze oval disk set with diamond-shaped markers about its border, each of a different precious stone.

Through the great metal doors of beaten bronze was a great foyer of immaculate marble lined with corrugated columns. Before him, carved of marble as well, was a tall desk that was unmanned. On the rounded wall to its right was a board covered in notices and signs. On its left were another set of bronzed double doors. Halls curved away to the left and right.

“Hello?” Martin’s voice echoed down the hall, but there was no response. He looked down one hall and then the other, and then shrugging his shoulders walked over to the board to see what was posted there.

It seemed to be a place where the minutes of the council meetings were posted, along with requests for laborers of both the skilled and unskilled variety, and other news and pronouncements. Amid varied and sundry items on the council’s agenda, he found record of a long meeting regarding reported sightings of undead in the Garden of Stones on the cliff above the town.¹⁴ An official warning was given to townsfolk to avoid the area if at all possible, and if not possible to go only by day.

A notice on the bottom right-hand corner of the board had a list of the various council member’s public office hours. Lydia of Isis only had office hours on Osilem in the afternoon; two days away. He was looking over the names of the other council members when he heard a voice coming echoing down the left corridor. Whoever it was spoke quietly, but the voice reverberated the hall.

“Bring this directly to [inaudible],” the voice said. “And no getting side-tracked.”

Martin then heard a disturbing sound like cracking and flapping leather, followed by the skittering coming down the marble hallway towards him, and then the flapping again, over and over.

Finally, a small disturbing creature came flying out of the hall into the chamber. It was a tiny humanoid with a hunched and emaciated body of yellowish crusty skin. It had large black rheumy eyes, a stubby tail, black claws on its hands and feet, and brownish leathery wings covered in hardened pimply flesh. However, its most noticeable feature, was its large disproportionate nose. It had a piece of black slate tied about its neck and a hunk of chalk fastened to it.

It landed and looked up at Martin. The watch-mage closed his mouth. He had read of such things in the Academy of Wizardry but had never seen one. It was a homunculus.

The ugly little creature frowned at him and walked closer. It’s ungainly body contorting, as it was forced to put one hand down before it to keep its balance every few steps. It was clear that one of its legs was half again as long as the other, and had twisted and blackened foot at its end.

“Um, hello... I, uh, was looking...” Martin began.

The creature pulled the slate from around its neck and began to furiously write on the board with its chalk. It opened its mouth as if to say something, but just turned the board around and pointed from it to the watch-mage.

“Who you?” the board asked.

“Uh, I am Martin the Green, Alumnus of the Academy of Wizardry, and Interim Watch-Mage of the Kingdom of Gothanius. I came looking to speak with Lydia the Holy.”

¹⁴ The Garden of Stones was the cemetery and monastery of Anubis the party passed right outside of Nikar. (see Session #68)

The homunculus squinched up its face like it had just tasted something bad. It erased the board and began to write again, more carefully this time, stopping twice to correct some mistake and write again. He turned the board around. “You big important wizard. Come to Master Mylor. He is smartest, anyway.”

“Well, I was hoping to talk to a council member, however, I am not sure if my current time allows...”

“Follow,” the board was now saying, and the homunculus began to hurry the best it could back down the hall.

Martin followed.

The creature stopped before a thick oaken door on the left side and turned. It was writing something on its board. “Wait.”

It went in and came out a moment later, a twisted smile on its wound of a mouth.

It pointed to its board, “Go.”

“Martin the Green? Come in?” came an articulate and nearly sibilant voice from within the office. The homunculus continued on whatever chore it had been sent on.

The office was brightly lit by tall narrow windows on the far wall. Behind a large oak desk, sat a man that was bald, except for curled tufts of black hair behind each ear. He had neat black goatee and a round bright smiling face and big blue eyes. He stood as Martin entered and revealed himself to be nearly as tall as Ratchis. He reached out a long-fingered hand with long pointed manicured nails.

The man wore soft green silk robes with a multitude of small yellow stars embroidered on it.

“I am Mylor, sometimes called Mylor the Mystical, an esteemed member of the Brotherhood of the Green Necromancers.¹⁵ Perhaps you have heard of it? I had heard of your arrival in town last night and meant to send you an invitation to come speak with me as soon as I thought you had settled, but lo and behold, here you are seeking me out. How fortunate!” He sat back down and gestured to another chair. “Please sit.”

“Um, thank you,” Martin replied, sitting. “But I must be honest I came looking for Lydia the Holy, or perhaps a member of her staff so that I might arrange meeting her.”

Mylor made a face as if a bad smell had wafted into the room, and then it broke open into a wide bright smile. Martin could notice that the council member had painted lips and wracked his mind to remember where in Aquerra that was common.

“Oh, I am sure Lydia’s aide, Daphne, I think her name is, is off somewhere not too far stuffing that hole beneath her piggish nose with pastries. She is certainly hard to miss, like the proverbial barn,” Mylor let out a hissing laugh. “But while I have you here, I am sure there are things we can talk about that would be more helpful to you. I have always found that the traveling watch-mage is much worldlier than those who sit around protecting peasants and laborers in their tiny villages.”

“Well, watch-mages fill an important role, that I would not think is all that different from yours and the council’s,” Martin replied.

“Yes... Well, the point of a council is that different members bring different strengths to the rule and prosperity of a town,” Mylor said, his smile never dying. “But all of that aside, I am sure we can help each other whatever our agendas.”

¹⁵ Little is known of the Brotherhood of Green Necromancers, and most of what is known is rumor as opposed to fact. While claiming to want to put a better face on the necromantic profession, they are often accused of worshiping devils, and seeking to build armies of undead.

“And what exactly is the agenda of the Brotherhood of Green Necromancers?” Martin asked, finally sitting.

“Oh, you have not heard of us? What are they teaching in that Academy these days? Is it true that necromancy is not taught there are a focus anymore?”

“Not since the days of... the Corruptor,” Martin replied.

“Ah, yes, the Corruptor...,” Mylor shook his. “His rash ways paints all of us who specialize in working with the energies of life and death a bad name. Of course, you know that necromancy can be used to for the benefit and betterment of people.”

“Yes...”

“Will you be staying in Nikar long?”

“Perhaps a month,” Martin replied. “One of my companions hopes to train and gain lore at the dwarven temple.”

“Mmm-hmmm, well... You feel free to come to me if you need anything during your visit. I can see it being beneficial to the two of us. There is much lore and magic to be shared.” Mylor the Mystical’s eyes opened wide.

“Yes, thank you, I may take you up on that,” Martin stood and offered his hand. “I have to be going now. My companions will be expecting me, and I need to find... Daphne, was it?”

Mylor took Martin’s hand daintily and frowned.

“I would look in her quaint little cottage on the central tier, or the bakery that is nearby, wiping pie-filling from her swollen chin.”

Martin smiled weakly.

“Don’t hesitate, Martin,” Mylor said. “You will find that I am versed in a great amount of lore that is useful to one who takes an adventurous road.”

Martin nodded and left.

The watch-mage headed back to the inn to find Ratchis counting coins on the floor, with some gems and other precious items laid out on a sack beside him.

The half-orc looked up at Martin, “What have you got?”

When Kazrack returned he joined them in counting and diving things up. Dorn, Flora and Bones knocked on the door and entered, wanting to get their share of the treasure gained from the orcs and give the party some gems as a gift. Flora and Bones would be leaving the next day with a caravan headed for Cutter Jack’s.

“And what about you?” Ratchis asked Dorn.

“I think it was a sign for me to help you help Nephthys,” the sandy-haired adventurer said. “At least for now.”

Afterwards, Ratchis and Kazrack made for a weapon-smithy on the lower tier, while Martin ran an errand to the general store and the Shop of Fine Sand, as the local magic shop was called.

There was no sign of Gunthar.

Ratchis had been to the weapon-smithy earlier in the morning and found his interaction with the bigoted dwarf who ran the place to be impediment to haggling, so he wanted Kazrack to come with him. He had been looking at masterwork great swords, and he wanted to purchase one despite the exorbitant price.

The lowest tier of Nikar was very different from the rest of the town. Aside from one bricked plaza outside the Public Baths, everything here was much more crammed together, and the western edge of the tier was a series of closed in streets running between tightly packed together hutch-like houses.

By trading the masterwork warhammer that the party had taken off one of Mozek's brothers, and several hundred more silver pieces, Ratchis was able to get the sword of his dreams. The long broad blade was slightly curved at the top, with an extra sharp edge. The blade seemed to emerge from the mouth of a golden dragon with ruby eyes, which served as the hilt and pommel, with a twining golden tail, about a large ruby. He swung it around in the open space by the forge and was impressed with its balance. It was well worth the price.¹⁶

"Here ya go, use it on other orcs," the dwarven smith said as he passed over the sword.

Meanwhile, Martin went down to the Central Tier. There he could see dwarven and gnomish workmen digging out plots to line the main street with trees. He stopped and talked with one of the gnomish workers, who offered to show him the way to the component shop, and then invited him to come to Fizzlepop's, an inn in the Gnomish Quarter.

Martin the Green had to ring a bell from the outside if the Shop of Fine Sand was to be let in. The door was opened by a tall elf that was as thin as a rail. The elf's long hair was bluish-black, and his skin had an alabaster sheen to it. He had long sharp features without a crease or wrinkle that still seemed to suggest a great age, and big green eyes.

Sherinian Felestan's shop was a cramped little white stucco house, lined with urns and glass cases filled with a myriad of things, from live frogs and crickets, to flowering bushes emerging from pots. There was paper and ink and book-binding materials for sale here as well, and a variety of scroll tubes, vials, and beakers. Many colorful birds sang as they chased each other from perch to perch, and a large snake slithered from an urn, hissing at another glass tank with several lizards and turtles.

The tall elf led Martin to a large over-stuffed chair that faced another with a tea cozy between them. This was in front of a large wooden desk, the watch-mage heard a chicken clucking behind it. Yet, despite all the animals, the place smelled of fresh cut flowers, and a cool moist breeze flowed in from a narrow window, high on one wall.

Sherinian sat across from Martin the Green, his face placid.

"Welcome, Watch-mage," the elf said. "It does me honor that you have decided to visit my humble shop. I was hoping you'd stop by when I heard of your arrival."

"You heard of my arrival, already?" Martin was surprised.

"I am a member of the council," Sherinian said. "We are briefed on the arrival of all people of note."

Martin smiled. "Ah, so Lydia the Holy would already know I was here?"

"I would assume so."

"I already met another member of the council when I went looking for her, Mylor."

Sherinian said nothing.

¹⁶ **DM's Note:** This masterwork great sword cost Ratchis, 990 pieces of silver, after the hammer trade-in, he only had to pay 440. The great sword grants a +1 to attack rolls, and a +2 to damage rolls. Note that the prices for masterwork items in Aquerra have changed since then.

“He offered to help me in my arcane studies,” Martin continued.

“I doubt that would win you many friends,” the elf replied.

“Why do you say that?” Martin cocked an eyebrow, as the elf poured them both tea without asking.

“Well, he openly admits his membership to the Brotherhood of Green Necromancers,” Sherinian said. “And while there has never been an evidence of foul doings on his part, his reputation is not the best, here or among your own order.”

“Have there been other watch-mages through here?”

“Yes, on occasion. Alexandra the Lavender of Bountiful is here at least once a year, and others pass through, as well.”

“Richard the Red?”

“I believe he was here as recently as one passing of the seasons,” the elf replied. “Are you looking for him?”

“Kind of... Uh, it is a matter of our order. I cannot really speak of it,” Martin changed the subject some. “Do you know why there is no representative of the Academy stationed in Nikar?”

“The council keeps voting the proposition down whenever it comes up. I think a couple of members fear that a watch-mage would end up voted onto the council as soon as an opening was available and use the resources of the Academy to exert political control.”

Now it was Martin’s turn to be quiet.

“My condolences on the archmage’s passing,” Sherinian added.

“Thank you,” Martin sipped some tea, happy that he had taken off Lacan’s Demise the night before. “If I may ask, I was wondering if you might be available for some training, I am on the cusp of understanding the arcane mysteries of the Fourth House.”

Sherinian shook his head. “I am sorry, but I do not have the time, nor inclination to take on such a responsibility.”

Martin nodded. “Perhaps you can recommend me to someone?”

The elf shook his head again.

“Do you come seeking or bringing me something?” Sherinian asked, putting down his cup and saucer and standing to go behind the desk.

“Uh...Both,” Martin replied, turning in his seat to follow. “I have some things I have gathered along the way. Could you use phase spider venom?”

A long conversation about components ensued, with Sherinian writing down long lists of things Martin needed as he read them off. Martin would return with the money after cashing in some gems at a shop the elf suggested. They also negotiated trading a spell or three, if the elf could have choice from the books Martin had collected along the way. In addition, the watch-mage would lend the elf his book of runes, sigils and wards for a week or so. Finally, Sherinian told Martin where Daphne’s cottage was, so that he might go looking for her there.

End of Session #69

Session #70

Martin navigated the narrow streets on the “shade side” of the central tier, following Sherinian’s directions to Daphne’s house.¹⁷

He found the small white cottage, as he came around a corner, nearly bumping into a pale gaunt young man, dressed in gray and wearing spectacles. Daphne was on her hands and knees in the garden out front, scooping out holes with a spade. Her woolen black hair was tied back with a kerchief, and her ample hips bulged against a white apron.

“Miss Daphne?”

She looked up, dirt staining her chubby cheeks. She stood, pushing a set of black spectacles up to her big blue eyes. She had a soft prettiness.

“I am Martin the Green, watch-mage of the Academy of Wizardry,” Martin announced, puffing himself up a little. “I was informed I might make an appointment to speak with Lydia the Holy with you?”

“Oh, Mister the Green. I had heard of your arrival,” she put out a dirty gloved hand and then yanked it back embarrassedly and pulled it off and then offered it again more demurely.

Martin shook it.

“Well, my mistress is very busy for the next few days,” Daphne said. “Why don’t you come inside and let me clean up and we can figure something out.”

Martin the Green followed the young woman into the cluttered main room of the cottage. There were several potted plants on a table, otherwise covered in papers, and every free space of wall was covered in shelves holding myriad ceramic curios.

Daphne ducked into a room, and emerged a moment later wearing a simple white dress and sandals.

“Tea?”

“Yes, thank you,” Martin smiled.

Daphne fussed in the tiny adjoining kitchen, commenting on the weather and asking about the condition of the roads from the east.

“Umm, when do you think Lady Lydia will be available?” Martin asked, as he took a cup and saucer from the smiling maid. She placed a plate of cookies on the table in front of him.

“Well, she is very busy, but honestly I cannot answer that question until I look at her calendar, which is back in the Council Hall. I plan to go by there first thing tomorrow to get some things before my daily meeting with my mistress. I will be certain to speak to her about it then, but... can you tell me what it is in regards to?”

Martin paused.

“Well, I would rather not divulge the details to any but her but sufficed to her that the fate of Derome-Delem hangs in the balance.”

Daphne’s eyes opened wide and she dropped her tea. “Really?”

“Yes.”

¹⁷ The north and south sides of the cliff tiers of Nikar are referred to as “shade side” and “sun side,” respectively because of the way the shadow of the cliff above falls at certain times of the day, the north sides tend to be more shaded.

“How imminent is the danger?” Daphne stood.

“Well... uh, um... we can't really say exactly when it will happen if it does,” Martin began.

“So, it may not happen?”

“That is what my companions and I are trying to prevent.”

Daphne wiped up the tea and the pieces of the broken cup and then collected Martin's. She appeared a lot calmer.

“I will be certain to try to convey the gravity of the situation,” Daphne said. “Perhaps, tomorrow... No, let's say the day after... why don't you return, and I am sure I will have an appointment with Lady Lydia then.

“Why don't we make it lunch at the inn,” Martin suggested. “It will be my treat and we can talk more at length. I am staying at the Inn of Friendly Flame.”

Daphne agreed with a broad smile.

“There was one other thing,” Martin added as he was shown to the door. “I was hoping Lydia, or perhaps you might... uh, be able to recommend me someone to help me in my arcane studies. I would think that a priestess of Isis would know someone, uh... appropriate.”

“Um, yes... I am sure my mistress can help you with that,” Daphne said. “I will make sure to mention to her as well. I can think of one or two people that might be appropriate, though of course that would be up to Lady Lydia.”

Martin the Green left the small cottage to return to the upper tier and the inn, in order to prepare for dinner at Mercy's, as the afternoon was growing long.

As he turned to the right out on the street, he did a double-take as he noticed the morose young man in the spectacles again. The young man turned away quickly from where he was standing across from Daphne's house and hastily walked in the other direction.

“How odd,” Martin said aloud.

Martin the Green found his companions at the Inn of the Friendly Flame preparing for dinner as well. He related to them much of what he had learned in his day about town and speculated aloud as to its political landscape.

“There are two mages on the Ruling Council,” Martin explained. “One is a priestess of Isis, and the other is a necromancer.”

“Is he a known...?” Kazrack began to ask.

“No, he is too tall to be a gnome,” Martin replied.

“I meant, is he a known necromancer,” Kazrack frowned.

“Haw! Haw!” Gunthar came strutting into the suite. “You get yer jaw fixed and people still can't understand you.”

“Where have you been all day?” Ratchis asked Gunthar.

“Exploring this shite-covered excuse of a burg,” Gunthar replied. “Now what's for dinner?”

“We are going over to the house of my former mentors,” Ratchis explained. “To talk with their daughter, Mercy and a priest of Bast that may be joining us. I have already told them all of what has happened to us, and what might happen still if Mozek is not stopped.”

“A Bastite? You can never trust a Bastite!” Gunthar protested.

“I might have handled it differently, myself,” Martin said. “But what is done, is done. Let us go meet him.”

Several hours later found them sitting around Mercy’s house, drinking after a huge dinner of game hens stuffed with bacon, baked apples, and huge pieces of rye bread with slabs of cheese and butter. Gunthar was very drunk and alternately dozed on the over-stuffed chair and awoke to mumble curses and eye Mercy lasciviously.

“How did you get stuck with him anyway?” Roland asked. He had reiterated his promise over dinner and had even given Ratchis some silver to go towards the party’s needs while in town.

“I forget,” Kazrack replied. Roland smiled broadly, and his apple cheeks flushed even more red. He took a deep sip of his wine. The dwarf made note of how much the Bastite had had to drink already.

“You know, I don’t think we need a little priss like this ponce with us,” Gunthar stood and turned to face Roland, and swayed. “It’s a rough world out there, girly. I think you might muss your hair or smear your face powder if you try to take on the kind of things heroes like us have to deal with all the friggin’ time.”

“Oh Gunthar, you’re awake!” Roland said, not bothering to hide insincerity. “I am sure a hero like you would be more than enough to keep me well-protected.”

“I don’t think I want you getting that close to me,” Gunthar said, and he sat back down. “Let’s talk about the magic items.”

“What about them?” Ratchis asked.

“I want my share. What have we got? This is party business, right? Then let’s get it done so we can get back to the inn and get to the real drinking.” Gunthar stood again, and walked over to the table, which Ratchis had helped Mercy clear. He grabbed the nearly empty bottle of wine and drained the last bit of it right into his mouth. Red wine spilled over his chin and through his blonde scruff and down his neck. He looked at Mercy and pointed to it. “Hey! Wanna lick that?”

“Gunthar!” Ratchis stomped over to him, and Kazrack stood up, but Mercy stepped between the towering half-orc and the foul-mouthed warrior and pushed the latter hard towards the door.

“Why don’t you just go now?” Mercy said to him calmly, but Martin noticed her tensing a fist.

Roland just looked away with a smile, and then looked back straight-faced. “It seems like you have offended the lady,” he said to Gunthar. She pushed him again, and Ratchis opened the door.

“I’ll see ya at the inn,” Gunthar said to his companions from the doorway. “And I want my fair share of the magic stuff and gems, but I’m sure I have nothing to worry about, you are the filthy virtuous ones.”

And with that he left.

“He truly is a test for you from Nephthys,” Mercy said to Ratchis, letting her anger subside and smiling and slapping him good-naturedly on his broad chest. “I am glad I was not armed, for I might have smashed my mace into his face.”

“Whenever I feel like my anger is going to explode at him, I remind myself that he was probably not loved enough as a child,” Ratchis replied.

“Oh, Ratchis! You are so big-hearted,” she lay her hand softly on his chest this time, as if to touch that heart. “Mother and father were right about you.”

“As crass as he is, he does have a point,” Kazrack said, sitting down across from Roland. “You have agreed to come with us, but we have not all agreed to let you do the coming. What skills do you bring to our party?”

Roland smiled even wider and then playfully mimicked the stern expression of the dour dwarf. “There is much my goddess has endowed me with in way of her miracles, and to adopt the exalted form.”

“The what?” the dwarf asked.

“I can transform into a panther,” Roland said, matter-of-factly.

Kazrack scoffed.

“I have heard of such things,” Ratchis said.

“As have I,” said Martin.

“I can demonstrate,” Roland offered.

“No, better to not squander the power your goddess gives you just to satiate our interest,” Kazrack said.

“It would not be squandering. Sometimes I think I prefer that form. Oh, I can also turn into a house cat, which is very useful for sneaking about... uh, I mean, you do, you know, sneak around some, right?”

“Ratchis does the sneaking,” Kazrack replied. “But we will take you at your word.”

The conversation meandered on for a time. It was agreed that the party would use some of their funds to purchase pearls for use in identifying their magical items, and that Roland would do what he could to discover as much as possible about the Ruling Council, and Mylor the Mystical in particular. Martin mentioned the warning posted in the Council Hall about the undead in the Garden of Stones, and they party decided they would look into it the following night.

“Where there is undead there is a necromancer, and since we already have a necromancer, all we need to do is connect the dots,” Roland reasoned.

Mercy begged off returning to the inn with the others, but Roland said he’d meet them there. He just needed to go by the temple of Bast where he was staying and change into something more suiting an evening in a tavern, than a private dinner.

Roland paused in the foyer of the temple of Bast to stroke a lynx that was luxuriating in the moonlight through a glass pane. He was washed and changed and dripping perfume, and on his way over to the Inn of Friendly Flame to meet up with his new companions.

“Oh, he came back,” a song-like woman’s alto said from behind him.

“Oh, hello Norena,” Roland stood and turned, bowing slightly to his fellow priest.¹⁸

“When we first decided to establish this temple, I took his presence as a sign from Bast that this was the proper place,” she said, kneeling to stroke the wild cat herself. It purred. “He does not come back every year, and when he does it is only for a few days, and never in winter.”¹⁹

She stood again.

Norena was tall, taller than Roland, and her svelte frame was much more comely on her than it was on him. She had sharply defined features, and narrow green eyes outlined in black pencil, which contrasted with her long curly red locks. She wore a simple low-cut maroon dress, and amber cat’s eye encased in gold on a fine chain just long enough to make the medallion draw more attention to the cut of the dress.

“I was coming to find you, Roland,” Norena’s broad smile implied laughter, and her eyes twinkled. “I am going to the dinky little inn that serves as high society around here to meet up with my new companions. I fear I will be leaving Nikar for a time very soon.”

Roland put his arm out and Norena took it and he began to lead her out of the temple.

“Now isn’t that strange? I was going to do the same to you,” Roland laughed. “I have found some new companions as well, but in my case we will not be leaving for a while. Whom have you joined up with and to what end?”

“You first.”

Roland’s smile widened even more, and he took a deep breath. “They are friends of Mercy of Nephthys, you know Mercy?”

Norena nodded.

“Ratchis is a half-orc, but he is a friar as well, and he has watch-mage and a rune-thrower with him, and some cheap warrior muscle following them around,” Roland explained. “They are here to do some training and gather information for a little pickle going on up in the Little Kingdoms.”

“The Little Kingdoms, hmmm? Was there not word of a dragon in those parts?”

”So, they say,” Roland’s eyes narrowed. “You were going to tell me about who you leaving with.”

“Oh, friends of a friend,” Norena said nonchalantly. “One of the infamous Brothers Greyish and a Librarian of Thoth. We’re taking the road out to Cutter Jack’s to help him find some *thing*.”

“What thing?”

“I don’t know,” Norena giggled. “I never pay too much attention to details.”

And with that she burst through the swinging doors of the Inn of Friendly Flame.

The place was alive with sound, sight and smell. The wood paneled walls and ceiling glowed an orange brown from the tiny colored lanterns at each table and above the hearth. One large bronze lantern hung in the center of the common room. It was carved with flying human figures wreathed in fire. A halfling was playing a hurdy-gurdy in a

¹⁸ Hierarchy in the Church of Bast is not steadfast. Priests who found temples can establish any kind of internal organization and hierarchy they like. While usually it is established in terms of who gains the most favor from Bast (i.e. levels), this is not always the case and a Bastite visitor only has the title of ‘guest priest’, wherever that might fall in the established organization.

¹⁹ Temples of Bast are home to many kinds of cats and other felines. Even otherwise wild or dangerous animals like lions and leopards will spend time around them, leaving alone priests and visitors alike, as long as they are unmolested.

corner leading a group of happily drunken dwarven singers in a funeral song. Groups of friends and couples ate and drank and talked, while Huggert and his two half-dwarven barmaids hurried back and forth serving and delivering.

“Norena!” someone cried, and she hurried in to exchange insincere kisses. Roland surveyed the room and saw Ratchis’ imposing form at a long bench with Martin beside him. They had their backs to the door. The Bastite joined them, taking a seat beside Gunthar. Kazrack and Dorn were squeezed in at the end of the bench.

“Drink up, Schnuffles!” Gunthar slurred, gesturing with a full shot glass to the two dozen shot glasses lined up in rows on the table before them: each of them brimming with dwarf spirits.

“Snuffles?” Roland asked, reaching for one of the shots as he grabbed Huggert’s attention to bring wine to the table.

“Because of his pig snout,” Kazrack explained, and took a shot.

“I do not have a pig snout,” Ratchis said matter-of-factly, glaring at Gunthar, and then taking a shot. “I have big nostrils.”

Gunthar was leaning over to his right, with his head lolling on his arms, but sat up suddenly letting out a laugh and a stream of spit and liquor on Roland. “I’m starting to think you’re getting a friggin’ sense of humor, Snuffles,” Gunthar coughed out. He noticed Roland glaring at him as he frantically wiped at his velvet jacket with a napkin. “What the in the Nine Hells are you lookin’ at, prissy?”

“A drunken lout,” Roland replied.

Gunthar burped and let his head slide back to the table again.

“Good come back,” Roland smirked.

Gunthar sat up again, straightened himself up and took another shot. He had noticed Norena approaching the table.

“Oh, Roland these must be the companions you told me about,” She said, looking at each of them in the eye. Her gaze stopped on Gunthar, who flashed her a mischievous smile. “Oh, who do we have here?”

“Hey, come over here and sit on my lap,” Gunthar offered.

“Oh, okay,” Norena said, pushing her hair from her face and going around Roland, but letting a hand trace the back of his neck. She plopped down on Gunthar’s lap with an exaggerated wiggle to get comfortable.

Kazrack coughed on a shot of spirits, blushing at the behavior.

Roland introduced each of his new companions to Norena of Bast, as she absently played with Gunthar’s long blonde hair.

“What happened to your ear?” She asked, grimacing.

“An orc even uglier than Ratchis,” Gunthar replied with a wink.

“Oh, he must have been really ugly!” Norena said, throwing a playful wink to Ratchis. “And for what it’s worth, I believed your side of the story all along, you know, when that unfortunate thing happened.”

“Thank you,” Ratchis replied.

“Of course, few other people in this town are as open-minded as I am,” she flashed her eyelashes.

“What unfortunate incident?” asked Kazrack.

“The guard mentioned it when we arrived,” Ratchis said.²⁰ He took another shot. Martin took his first and coughed, causing Gunthar to laugh at him. One of the barmaids arrived with a flagon of wine and several tin cups.

“Oh.”

“And Martin the Green! Alumnus of the Academy!” Norena said, allowing Gunthar to pour her some wine. “You know, one of my old adventuring companions is a watch-mage. Perhaps you have met her? Alexandra the Lavender?”

Martin nodded. “Yes, I met her on my way to Gothanius.”²¹

There was an explosion of laughter at the far end of the bar on the right side of the common room. There, a group of people, mostly women, was gathered around a figure at the corner of the bar. It was slight man in a billowy sailcloth shirt, and a feathered hat on the bar. He had long slicked-back bluish-gray hair, sharp powdered features, bright white teeth, and the slightest point to his thin ears.

He was intriguingly handsome, and his obvious half-elven heritage lent an air of mischievousness to his smile. He looked over at Norena, who stood up and he did the same. “Norena, my dear!”

The man came over to the table gracefully. He carried a slender blade at his waist.

“This is Razzle Greyish, one of the infamous Brothers Greyish of Ettinos,” Norena introduced him.

“And renown throughout Aquerra as the finest swordsmen to draw breath,” Razzle added with a bow and a flourish. “I, of course, am the finest even among my brothers, though I am but the youngest.”

“Razzle is one of my companions coming with me,” Norena said.

“And where is it you are going?” Martin asked, standing and introducing himself.

“Oh, one can never share one’s secrets, can one?” Razzle replied.

“Well, I did not mean to pry, but as a watch-mage I thought I might be able to add something to your lore or quest,” Martin said. “Is it not the watch-mages that people come to when they need someone they can trust?”

“Ah, but the same is said of the Brothers Greyish, and are you about to divulge your own secrets?”

“Touché.”

“Ha, ya might as well tell him all the secrets, Ratchis tells them to every bloody poofter that comes around anyway,” Gunthar stood, annoyed and still drunk. Norena was holding Razzle close, with a hand around his slender waist and the other stroking his chest. “I’m going to the Gnomish Quarter where they really know how to throw a party.”

He stumbled out cursing.

“And when is it that you leave, Norena?” Roland asked, pouring himself more wine,

“In perhaps a week’s time,” she replied.

“No need to rush it, I have just arrived and have not yet gotten a chance to see what the town has to offer in the ways of wine and women!” Razzle added, and with that he dipped Norena to his left and planted a big kiss on her lips. She came back up laughing and the bard by the hearth struck up an upbeat tune, joined by drummers and a horn-player

²⁰ See Session #68

²¹ The rest of the party met Alexandra the Lavender in Session #7

that had just arrived. Many couples leapt to their feet and tables were pushed aside, as drunken dancing and singing bloomed.

Several hours later, Martin the Green found himself staggering down the narrow rear hall to the common room, returning from outhouse. While he had not kept up with Kazrack and Ratchis, he thought he could at least keep up with Roland, and found that he failed. Suddenly, Norena was right in front of him.

“Ooh, Martin, but are you looking out of sorts,” She cooed.

“I think I will be getting some water and going to bed,” Martin slurred.

“Is that an invitation?” Norena leaned in close to Martin, and looked at him, her full lips shining in the torchlight.

“Um, well... uh...”

She laid a big open mouth kiss on him, and he sputtered and gasped.

“I... uh...” He felt a strange tingling, as if his mind were becoming foggier than even all the wine and dwarven spirits had made it, and then he shook it off.

“Oh, you’re as green as the come,” Norena laughed. “I guess I know why your classmates dubbed you as they did.”²²

She winked and then slipped past him, heading towards the outhouses.

Martin wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and continued on into the smoky and still loud common room. Dorn helped him to bed, while Kazrack and Ratchis left to go to the Temple of the Grandfathers and Mercy’s house respectively. Roland had disappeared much earlier in the night, amid the dancing, with nary a ‘good night.’

Isilem, the 16th of Ter – 565 H.E.

The next morning Martin slept until nearly noon, his head heavy with the wine and spirits of the night before.

Dorn explored Nikar, while Ratchis and Kazrack began their respective training. Gunthar was nowhere to be found. Roland slept into the afternoon.

Impatiently, Martin went by Daphne’s house in the afternoon. She was on her way out as he arrived.

“Oh, I thought our lunch was tomorrow,” she said, confusion in her voice.

“Yes, well... I am sorry to be impatient. I just wanted to know if you had spoken to Lady Lydia about my need to confer with her,” Martin asked, embarrassedly.

“Oh yes,” Daphne hefted the pile of papers she held to her chest, and awkwardly pushed her spectacles closer to her big brown eyes. “As I said, she is very busy and we have not gone over her appointments for the week; that is actually where I am going now.”

Martin motioned for the pile of papers, and Daphne hesitantly handed them to him. They began to walk together towards the stairs up to the Upper Tier and the Council Hall.

²² Graduates of the Academy are granted their color by their fellow students of the same graduating year (with approval of the Faculty).

"I did mention to her that you were looking for someone to assist you in your arcane studies, and she gave me a name," Daphne said with a smile, as if she approved of the recommendation. "I was going to tell you at lunch tomorrow, but I guess I can tell you now. Her name is Visalyia. She lives down in the Gnomish Quarter."

"Was she an adventuring companion of Lydia the Holy?"

"Only peripherally. She has helped my mistress with this or that over the years. She is an illusionist, like you and, uh... a bit of adventurer. She should be the right fit," Daphne explained. "Normally, I would send a message ahead to her, but in this case I think it'd be okay if you just say that Lydia sent you."

"How will I find her?"

"Go to Fizzlepop's Tavern in the Gnomish Quarter and ask for her," Daphne said. "They are very friendly down there. Someone will direct you."

"Thank you very much," Martin bowed slightly, handing the pile of papers back to Daphne as they arrived at the Council Hall. "Please thank Lady Lydia for me and tell her that I hope to meet her soon. I look forward to our own lunch tomorrow."

The streets of the Gnomish District were narrow and were made even more narrow by the long shale awnings that pointed low into the street, forcing the tall (and these days, lanky), Martin the Green to walk with great care. He ducked at each corner of the winding streets and looked up to get his bearings as well. He had long ago lost the pudginess of his early days with the party. Now his face and joints were lined with stretch marks, and deep wrinkles bagged under his muted green eyes.

The streets were crowded with gnomish homes of various sizes, most built into the ground and then haphazardly stretching out around other houses. It was all made of stone and clay, and the narrow alleys felt cool, even though the sun glared on the upper tiers. Many of the homes also had storefronts, and a myriad of signs swung every which way advertising tinkers, coopers, smiths, jewelers, tailors and haberdashers. The watch-mage was surrounded with the many chattering voices of gnomes, most of whom smiled and tipped their caps as they saw him walk by.

Martin the Green ducked into the low-ceilinged tavern with its tin roof painted red and gold and was immediately reminded of the pub back in Garvan. A sunken section of the floor held a rack that reached from wall to wall that held over two dozen tapped kegs of beer and spirits. The bar was very low, and all the stools were cut for gnome-sized patrons, though a halfling and most dwarves would have been comfortable as well.

A handful of gnomes and one curly topped halfling were discussing a loudly snoring human crammed into one of the booths. His hand still held the mug of ale he had apparently recently spilled all over himself. It was Gunthar.

Martin smiled weakly at the gnomes, one of which seemed to be proprietor, and walked over to Gunthar, awkwardly kicking the man's boot.

"Uh... Wha?" Gunthar snorted, and then sat up startled, dropping the mug and patting at his wet stomach and crotch. He looked up at Martin and winked. "I was dreaming of me Ma. Now, what do you want? You all miss me already?"

"I am here on other business but seeing you I wanted to make sure you were not off giving the party a bad name," Martin replied.

"Naw! These gnomes are good guys," Gunthar slurred. He grabbed his mug and stood, banging his head. He crouched and walked over to where the kegs were, cursing. "I can drink all I want, and I pay when I leave, though I have to serve myself, but if you ask someone, they'll get you a drink, though I think they spit in it."

"Hmm, I wonder why'd they do that?"

“Eh, who cares?” Gunthar shrugged his shoulders and took a deep gulp of beer from his recently filled mug and wiped the foam from his mustache. He looked up at Martin and winked again. “Anyway, I spit in the ones I get for others just in case.”

Martin turned to notice that the group of gnomes and the one halfling were carefully watching the whole exchange.

“Hey Gunthar! Who’s this? Your girlfriend?” the gnome behind the low bar called. He wore a green bandanna and had a golden beard and a flat and wide nose that flared out past either side of his face. The other gnomes and the halfling laughed and turned to their drinks.

“Oh shite! I thought it was yer Ma, but then I noticed he hasn’t got a prick,” Gunthar snapped back, and the group of exploded into laughter, including the bartender.

Martin was agog.

Gunthar smiled. “Was there something else you wanted, Shirley?”

“Well, I suppose I should be happy you have made some friends,” Martin replied. “Anyway, I did want to remind you to meet us at the Inn of Friendly Flame an hour before sundown so we can go do that thing.”

“Uh-huh.”

Martin walked over to the bar and got down on one knee.

“Good sir, might I ask you if you could direct me to the home of Visalyia the Illusionist?”

“Maybe if you buy a drink, Shirley,” the gnome cracked. Martin tossed a silver into the copper urn on the bar.

“Heh.” The gnome explained how to find it.

Despite being confused by the short and winding streets with frequent name changes, Martin eventually found the small clay house that belonged to Visalyia. She had woolen gray hair, and great corpulent crags around her cracked nose. She painted her eyelids deep purple and wore crimson paint on her lips.

She laughed silently at the end of every sentence she spoke, and rubbed her wrinkled little hands together frequently, turning her head to one side to look at Martin from behind her hair that hung down in long bangs over her face.

After explaining that he was sent by Lydia the Holy over tea in the cramped little cottage, Martin and Visalyia negotiated payment of three hundred and fifty pieces of silver and the choice of a couple of spells from his found spellbooks.

“Oh, you watch-mages are always so stingy,” she said and then covered her mouth as if laughing. “But I know how to get you to open your money pouches and your spellbooks.”

“Oh? You’ve dealt with watch-mages before?”

“One or two.”

“Alexandra the Lavender?”

“Pshaw! No, not her,” Visalyia crinkled her face. “No, that brown fellow in Ettinos, and Richard the Red.”

“You know Richard the Red?”

“Oh, I remember him when he was just pipsqueak, and when he first got his cloak. Nice cloak.”

“Well, he is very stylish.”

“I meant that it allows him to enter the realm of shadow,” Visalyia let an actual laugh escape her, and then she coughed. “I identified it for him.”²³

“Oh, can you do that for me? My companions and I have some things that give off magical auras,” Martin asked.

After further negotiation, she would get second choice of what was identified, as long as Martin provided the pearl needed to cast the spells. The training would begin in a few days, but in the meantime, Martin could come back the next day to bring the magical items for identification.

The common room of the Inn of Friendly Flame began to get crowded as sundown approached. The party formerly known as the Fearless Manticore Killers readied their gear in one of the suites above, as they waited for Roland and Gunthar to arrive, and discussed what they might name themselves.

“I don’t even like the idea of naming ourselves,” Kazrack said. “It seems arrogant.”

“If we do not name ourselves then others always will,” Martin explained. “People enjoy a shorthand way of referring to a group of people.”

“Dorn, do you have a suggestion?” Ratchis asked his newest companion.

The shaggy-haired man poured himself a goblet of wine and shrugged, “It’s your group.”

As they bandied about possibilities, Gunthar arrived. They all spied a small figure that seemed to be following him in.

“You guys divvy the loot yet? I want my cut. Funds are lower than yer momma’s teats,” Gunthar said, immediately grabbing the bottle of wine from Dorn.

Both Kazrack and Ratchis glowered at the blonde Neergaardian, and then looked down to see who was with him. It was young lithe gnome woman with long brown hair frosted with light blue and tied back in a braid. She had big brown eyes that shone above her prodigious nose. She wore a flower-patterned skirt, furry boots and ruffled blouse; one of her ears had several piercings.

“This here is Neela,” Gunthar introduced. “She and I, uh... are friends.”

The gnome woman looked down bashfully, and then back up and smiled at Kazrack and Martin. She did not make eye-contact with Ratchis.

“Is she your new girlfriend?” Ratchis asked.

“This here is Ratchis,” Gunthar said to Neela, stroking her hair gently. “He’s ugly and mean, but he’s alright. But still, uglier and meaner than alright.”

“Yes, yes. Right, right,” Neela giggled, quickly. She covered her mouth with her hand and looked up from under her bangs.

Martin stepped forward and got down on one knee to meet Neela at eye-level. He put out a hand to shake.

²³ The Realm of Shadow is another name for oft-misnamed ethereal plane.

“Hello, I am Martin the Green, one of Gunthar’s companions,” Martin smiled.

She giggled and pulled her hands away.

“Right, right. Hi, hi... I...uh, Nisilla,” the gnome girl said.

“Gunthar! Does she even speak the common tongue?” Ratchis roared. The brutish half-orc pushed the Neergaardian out of the way and he looked down at the gnome girl. “Can you speak Common?”

“Eep!” Neela (or Nisilla, as she called herself) leapt behind Martin and then hurried over beside Gunthar and reached up for his hand.

Gunthar knelt down beside her.

“Don’t worry, pun’kin. His bark is worse than his bite, but his breath, well, that’s worse than a dog’s,” Gunthar smoothed her hair with affection, and winked up at Ratchis.

She rubbed her nose in his blonde scruff.

“In all our travels, this is perhaps the most disturbing of all we have seen,” Kazrack intoned.

“Kazrack, we’ve seen a pit full of zombie half-orc infants being devoured by rats,” Ratchis spat.

The dwarf bowed his head.

“Not having seen that and having seen this,” Dorn said, taking the opportunity to grab the wine back from Gunthar. “I can only imagine that this ranks somewhere close.”

Both Gunthar and Ratchis scowled at the cohort.

Gunthar walked the gnome to the door of the suite to see her off, explaining that he’d come see her later. She looked confused and then hurriedly nodded, saying, “Right, right. Bye-bye.”

He gave her a kiss on the nose, and she left.

Ratchis was right up in his face the moment he turned around.

“If I find out that you coerced or tricked her in anyway, you’ll be finding out what my fist tastes like!”

Gunthar shrugged and walked back towards Dorn and the bottle of wine without a sign that he took the threat seriously, “I always figured it tasted like the inside of Kazrack’s ass.”

Ratchis took a step towards him, but Kazrack raised a hand and turned to the irascible Northrop brother.

“Gunthar, we feel you have a lot to learn about camaraderie and friendship, and about respecting your...ahem...peers,” the dwarf said.

“I need to learn about rotting camaraderie and friendship?” Gunthar scoffed. “Who was it that didn’t allow Aldovar to kill you when all, but Dough... I mean, Martin, were half-dead on the floor? Who told you about his plan to kill the dragon and let you have a piece of it? Who has put up with your dour-pusses and grandma points of view for all these weeks?”

“None of those things change that you have not paid us proper respect due companions,” Kazrack said.

“Go take a shite on your respect,” Gunthar responded. “I want my cut of the magic. I know we found a bunch of potions and other things and I am owed some.”

"I have negotiated with the woman I am training with to get her to identify their magical properties," Martin explained. "But as I was explaining to Kazrack and Ratchis before, we need to provide her with a pearl worth at least one hundred pieces of silver."

"I have a pearl," Gunthar said. "But I want to be reimbursed for three-fourths of it by yous, and first choice of what we get."

"Is it worth enough?" Ratchis asked. He turned to the dwarf. "Kazrack can you appraise it?"

"It is worth bloody enough," Gunthar said.

"Pearls are worthless trash, what do I know of what silly humans or elves would pay for it," Kazrack added.²⁴

"You will donate freely as part of our group, or we will simply have to do without knowing what the items do," Ratchis said.

"You can't afford it, can ya?" Gunthar smirked. "Spent all your pennies on that fancy-schmancy new sword. Ha! Let the pig-fucker loose in the city and he buys the whole damn candy shop!"

"This is exactly the kind of thing we are talking about," Kazrack said.

"I can hear you ladies bickering way down the hall," a voice said as the door to the suite slammed shut. It was Roland. He wore a chain shirt that hung loosely on him, clearly it was not yet fastened correctly. A crossbow was slung on his left side, and a quiver was on his back. He wore a rapier at his belt. A tiny metal skullcap rested on his curly brown locks. "Perhaps you should keep it down and join me in a drink or three before we go out there. I have learned some things."

"And I saw something today ya might want to know," Gunthar added.

"What are you talking about?" Ratchis turned back to the Neergardian.

"First, I want to make an agreement beforehand about any loot we collect on whatever it is we are about to do in the cemetery."

"No one will be looting the cemetery!" Ratchis said through clenched teeth.

"You know for someone who supposedly upholds freedom you sure do bloody tell people what to do an awful lot!"

"Is this a bad time?" Roland asked, glibly. He began to open the bottles of wine he had brought with him and pouring some. "Should we cancel the foray against evil so you all can finish your little spat?"

There was a long pause.

"You had some information?" Martin finally asked. He declined the Bastite's offer of wine.

"Groups of youths have been sneaking off to the cemetery at night since the monks abandoned their monastery in the Garden of Stones," Roland explained. "They go there to be rebellious and for trysts and the like."

"So, they might have disturbed something, released some undead?" Martin speculated.

"That doesn't seem unlikely," Roland replied.

²⁴ Dwarven culture does not consider pearls to be precious gems.

“Heh,” grunted Gunthar as he re-filled his glass. A thin stream of wine poured down his chin. “You got one thing wrong there, ponce. The monks ain’t abandoned shite.”

“What do you mean? There have been no monks since they left for their convocation early last year,” Roland said.

“I saw some monks today. They walked right through town leaving by the western gate,” Gunthar said. “There was three of them. Black cloaks, wooden sandals, tiny clubs connected with chains, hooked dagger shaped like fangs, the usual worthless shite.”

“But the western gate is in the other direction from the Garden of Stones,” said Roland. “And if the monks were back the Council would know, and that means I would know.”

Kazrack raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, if it were monks of Anubis, but more likely it is monks of that other sect. The ones we suspect truly worship Rahkefet,” Ratchis said.

“Ah, yes you mentioned them at Mercy’s,” Roland said. “But you never mentioned they had strayed so far from their faith that they’d create, control or even condone undead.”

“I would put nothing past them,” Ratchis said.

“Our previous lenience to these monks was for the sake of our former companion Beorth,” Kazrack added. “If we meet them again, we will let justice prevail instead.”

Ratchis nodded.

“All this talk has gotten me in the mood to do some killing. Let’s go,” Gunthar gulped his last glass of wine and grabbed his weapon belt from the back of the chair.

They all prepared to leave.

“Oh! What about the name?” Martin asked.

“Let’s just use the last one we though up,” Kazrack said, obviously bored of the topic. “It represents what we are trying to do... I guess...”

“Remember your peace-knots,” Martin said.

Ratchis, Kazrack, Martin, Roland, Gunthar and Dorn climbed the stairs down to the Central Tier and to the great gated tunnel that went east onto the Mountain Door.²⁵ Ra’s Glory hung low behind them, a mere glimmer that cast long shadows that turned quickly round the corners of the white and gray little houses.

A trio of armed dwarves approached them as they neared the gate.

“Leaving town, rune-thrower?” the center dwarf asked Kazrack. He eyed the rest of the group, letting his vision linger on Roland first and then up at Ratchis.

“Yes, my companions and I are going to investigate the reports of undead in the cemetery above.”

“At the Council’s bidding?” the dwarf sounded confused.

²⁵ “The Mountain Door” is the main road leading from the southeastern coast of Derome-Delem into its mountainous inner lands.

“I was not aware that we needed their permission to do so,” Kazrack replied, sincerely.

“Well, sir, I am not really sure. I will have to report this to the Captain, though.”

“We have nothing to hide.”

“But you do understand that the outer gate is closed at sundown and is not re-opened until just before dawn,” the dwarf said solemnly. “If you leave now you will not be able to return until morning.”

“We’ll be fine,” Kazrack replied, looking at his companions and nodding.

“Okay, I will let you through,” the dwarf said. “But I’ll need your names. What do you call yourselves again?”

“The Keepers of the Gate,” said Ratchis. The dwarves looked to Kazrack to confirm this. The rune-thrower nodded.

The gate was opened, and they walked through two at a time into the huge dark tunnel. As they marched Martin explained that he had found a spell that would help alert them to being scryed, but that he would need help acquiring the component. After a quick discussion of cost and logistics, Kazrack agreed to make some the needed small brass horns²⁶ while doing his training and forging his armor.

They had emerged from the tunnel and were on their way up the partially enclosed stones steps carved into the cliff face when they heard the echoing clang of the black outer gate closing.

Ratchis led the way out of the stairway and onto the marble plaza that marked the entrance to the cemetery and led to the open foyer of the monastery building. A damp breeze cut through the barren trees that dotted the cemetery and roiled a light mist that obscured vision. Marble headstones of different sizes and shapes dotted the green and brown hill that the cemetery was comprised of. Several tombs seemed to have been built into the side of the hill itself. The monastery was built into a cleft in the hill, and an archway in the eastern wall that flanked the plaza led to a steep marble stairway that the party had climbed to get here when they first arrived from Gothanius.²⁷

Ratchis, Gunthar and Kazrack spread out into the cemetery. Ratchis went furthest in, signaling the others to stay back while he looked for signs of tracks. Roland pulled his cloak closer around his shoulder, as the breeze was quite cold, and he stayed close to Martin, as the Watch-Mage entered the plaza and looked around. Dorn stood between the two groups and loaded his crossbow.

Ratchis had just noticed fresh tracks heading both deeper into the cemetery and back towards the plaza when he heard Gunthar call out. The half-orc jerked to his feet and looked where the Neergaardian warrior was pointing. A dark crouched moved haphazardly from stone to stone, looking to nearly be pushing off them and grabbing on to them as it moved along, moaning softly.

“Looks like a zombie over here!” Gunthar said.

“Bast grant me your divine sight to divine the presence of evil,” Roland chanted, flicking his ruffled shirtsleeves and grabbing hold the gold ankh about his neck. It was engraved with a cat’s eye.

“Well, is it evil?” Kazrack asked.

“I cannot tell. It is too far away,” Roland replied. “Let us get closer.”

The Bastite moved forward and Kazrack inched over to join him. Gunthar looked confused at the hesitation, as he had already drawn both of his swords. Martin began to walk over as well.

“Let us be careful we do not accidentally harm any of the village youths if they are here,” Martin warned.

²⁶ **DM’s Note:** The spell in question was Detect Scrying.

²⁷ See session #68

There was the sudden sound of movement in some bushes on the far side of the closest tomb as several humanoid figures burst from there. They were tattered clothing and had slavering jaws with fanged teeth. Their skin had a sickly look to it, and their eyes were swollen and rheumy.

“Something fresh,” one of them hissed. They moved with hungry speed, spreading out in twos towards each of the three adventurers in the forefront.

“Ghouls!” Ratchis cursed.

Gunthar ignored them and took the opportunity to hustle over to the first figure.

“Dorn! Watch our rear flank!” Ratchis barked commands in battle as he often did, drawing his masterwork greatsword from his back. “Gunthar! Get back here!”

“Natan-ahb! Judge these creatures and have them flee from your wrath!” the dwarf called to his god, grabbing hold of the pouch of runestones about his neck. A wave of positive energy washed out from him in all directions and the six closest ghouls shrieked as they collapsed into dust, leaving just a pile of musty clothing in their place.

“Ha! Ha!” Gunthar cheered, still moving to catch up to the stumbling figure. “Stumpy sure showed them where it’s at!”

Dorn and Roland heard a sound behind them and spun around. A squat and broad dwarf-like figure was charging across the plaza from the rear archway towards Dorn. It seemed to be covered in black carapace that reached back over its head and down its back, connecting to its arms with a wing-like membrane. Its eyes glowed a bright red, and it held a warhammer before it, punching out at the warrior as it arrived at him.

End of Session #70

Session #71

Dorn nearly crumpled as he withdrew from the strange undead dwarf.

It looked up at the others, smiling with cracked yellow teeth, saliva strands breaking and popping to pour down its chin and beard, as it swung its hammer back and forth menacingly.

Roland growled and suddenly the top of his body began to stretch forward unnaturally. His head sunk into his shoulders as his mouth formed into a powerful feline snout, and his arms shortened up and thickened. The Bastite's clothing, skin and armor burst out into thick black fur, and a tail sprouted out from his lower back and his legs also shortened and bent with powerful muscles rippling. He roared and charged at the dwarf-thing, now in the form of a black panther.

Roland grabbed hold of the dwarf-thing in his powerful jaws and knocked it over as he ripped at it with his claws. He was able to bring his rear claws to bear as well, raking at it mercilessly. The grappling duo tumbled over and the thing was able to break free and attempt to hustle away. Roland slowed it down with one last swat of his paw.

Kazrack hurried over to help.

Meanwhile, Gunthar reached the figure stumbling behind the gravestones. He gave it a kick before he could see clearly that it was a young man in black clothes and cloak. The young man groaned, and the Neergaardian yanked him up by his collar and smacked him with the back of his off-hand, which still held a short sword. The kid grunted in pain and seemed semi-conscious at best.

"Stop it!" Ratchis commanded Gunthar, beginning to run over, but as he noticed the fight against the undead dwarf-thing was moving further away and nearly through the archway out of the plaza, the half-orc hesitated.

Roland and the dwarf were tangled again, blood flying out and streams from its many cuts and scratches as the Bastite struggled to get his jaws into a killing position about its thick neck. They tumbled through the archway and the thing broke free as they fell to left down the steep stone steps in the alley created by the monastery and the cemetery wall. Roland pounced at it again as it ran past another alley that turned behind the east wing of the monastery, and Kazrack hustled after them.

Suddenly a small figure stepped out of the darkness of the alley and fired an arrow at the dwarf as he was only halfway down the steps. The arrow pierced the dwarf's inner thigh and punctured his codpiece. He stumbled but was able to keep his footing as he cried out in pain.

The small figure lingered in the shadow of the corner of the building. Kazrack could see that it was a ghoulish little halfling with bare feet covered in wiry hair, and a swollen skull draped with nearly translucent skin and large milky eyes. It wore armor that seemed to fit it like a second skin, in fact it looked like it was probably made of skin, and held a short bow in its hand, and a short sword was at its belt.

Clouds rolled across the moon.

"What's going on?" Dorn cried out. "I can't see!"

Kazrack charged the rest of the way down the stairs, halberd out in front of him, but the little ghouls side-stepped deftly.

Martin made his way to the archway at the top of the stairs, as Gunthar ran over to join the fight, letting the young man drop to the ground with another grunt. Dorn stood in the plaza, looking back and forth unsure of himself.

"Dorn, relay what is going on back to me," Ratchis said, stepping over to the collapsed figure behind a tombstone and calling to his goddess to heal him.

“There is another thing down past the archway,” Dorn said, as Martin relayed the goings on to him from the top of the steps.

“Are you okay?” Ratchis asked the young man. He could now see the lanky figure was probably not more than fifteen summers old. He had short tight curls on his head, and his green eyes were blood shot; a thin bit of stubble struggled against his acne to dominate his long face, which was covered in white powder to make him look pale. The powder had come off in many places revealing his olive complexion below. He reeked of ale.

“Mommy?” the boy murmured, and then his eyes opened wide, and he stood and stepped back and raised his hands above his head. “I mean... Raaaarrgh!”

Ratchis growled. “Come on!” He grabbed the boy by the scruff of the neck and began to drag him towards the plaza.

“What? No! No!” the boy weakly protested.

Kazrack had turned to engage the halfling ghoul, when another figure lurched out of the dark alley. It was a zombie nearly seven feet tall and wearing a black breast plate. Kazrack spun back around and he barely got his halberd in the way to block a great sword swinging down at him. The dwarf’s arms trembled from the force of the blow, and the tip of the sword nicked his temple, sending blood down the side of his face.

“Aaargh! There is another one!” Kazrack called to his companions. The undead dwarf continued to struggle to break free of Roland, but the Bastite was strong and quick in panther form and kept pulling it back in for more worrying.

The little ghoul turned behind Kazrack and stepped back to bring its bow to bear from a flanking position. The dwarf spun around and slapped the bow with the head of his halberd hoping to snap it in half, but only managed to knock the arrow out of alignment so it missed. The maneuver cost him however, as he felt the heavy blows of the warrior-zombie crunching into his armor from behind, nearly driving him to his knees.

“What’s going on down here?” Gunthar said, barreling down the stairs as the clouds rolled by providing some ambient light once again. He spotted Roland in panther form for the first time. “Who let the cat out of the bag?”

“What’s the matter with you?” Ratchis asked the kid as he dragged him along. “What is going on?”

“I’m so sorry,” the kid whined, tears smearing the white powder on his face even more.

“Sounds like they need your help down there,” Martin said, as he hustled back to where Ratchis was dragging the young man past Dorn. “You go, I’ll take care of this.”

“I am sorely wounded! There are three of them!” Kazrack cried out to emphasize the dire situation.

“Blast him out of existence if he gives you any trouble,” Ratchis said with a wink, pointing to the drunken youth. “Bring him to the archway, so we can make sure you are safe. Dorn, guard the rear.”

And with that the half-orc bolted through the archway and down the stairs.

“Please don’t banish me!” the kid covered his face with his hands and sat dejectedly on the stained white stone of the plaza.

“It’s okay, don’t worry,” Martin the Green reassured him. “I’m a watch-mage. I’m here to help.”

The dwarf-thing stopped moving, so Roland let go with his jaws and padded quickly over to Kazrack, moving into the space left open by the withdrawing halfling ghoul. He licked the dwarf on the leg with his scratchy tongue, casting a healing spell.²⁸

²⁸ **DM’s Note:** Roland has the Natural Spell feat, allowing him to cast spells while in panther form.

The Bastite snarled in surprise as the undead dwarf-thing was suddenly on its feet again and sneaking past the melee to come around and slam its hammer into Kazrack's side.

"Outta my way, Stumpy!" Gunthar came blundering into the shadowy alley, and Kazrack barely moved out of the way, but Gunthar's swung wide. "I need light!"

Dorn lit a torch. "Martin, I'm going down there."

The watch-mage turned to the sandy-haired cohort to say something when Dorn let out an "uh-oh".

The young lad leapt to his feet and began to run for it as soon as Martin turned. The watch-mage reached into his Bag of Tricks and threw a fuzzy ball that grew into a badger at the kid.

"Trip him!" Martin commanded. The black and white animal charged into the man's feet, but he was miraculously able to leap up and avoid the attack and make his way to the steps down to the road that led to town.

Meanwhile, Roland howled, human pain coming through his panther mouth, as the zombie-warrior forced him back with twin telling blows, and then moved to parry a blow from Kazrack, after one got through, crunching armor.

Roaring, Ratchis came running into the fray with his brand-new masterwork great sword over his head, but the violence of his own missing swing at the undead dwarf thing, tripped him up and he slammed against the right hand wall and had to duck from being slapped in the face with his own blade.²⁹

The dwarf-thing reached out to touch Ratchis with a black calloused hand, but the half-orc spun away and brought his sword between them. This left it open to two blows from Gunthar's sword. It sputtered and fell, and dark red blood began to pool put beneath it.

Everyone was surprised by a snort, followed by the sound of hooves on the stone floor of the alley. A large boar, snorting steam, with roiling red and black bristly fur, came charging out of the left-hand hall, smashing into Gunthar.

"Ratchis, it's your momma!" Gunthar swore. Unfortunately for him, his swords were thrown wide and he felt the bite of the zombie-warrior's great sword on his shoulder and chest. Deep bruises swelled beneath the Neergaardian's armor.

Ratchis spun around and with two hacks of his great sword the fiendish beast dropped to its stomach with a pitiful squeal and then disappeared in a flash of sulfurous smoke.

"Stay alert," Ratchis warned. "I think a wizard of some kind must have summoned that."

Roland yelped as he bit the zombie-warrior, opening himself to a glancing blow from an arrow fired by the little ghoul.

A thrust from Kazrack's halberd knocked the zombie-warrior down on his rear end.

The little ghoul continued to retreat down into the darkness of the alley, firing arrows into the fray. Gunthar winced as one clipped his waist and he moved in to try to finish the prone zombie-warrior, so he turned and charged up the alley, nearly blind. A foul stench filled his nostrils and clung to his exposed skin and he could taste a mix of spicy beef stew and wine in the back of his throat. The little ghoul flashed a ghastly smile that quickly died as Gunthar managed to bring his long sword down and crack the thing's bow in half.

"Ha! Ha! Take that you little ball of shite!" Gunthar laughed, as the thing backed away a bit more.

²⁹ **DM's Note:** Ratchis' player rolled a natural '1' and then confirmed it with another miss, but made his Reflex save against hitting himself for full damage.

“You command men and beasts?” the young man said with fear in his voice, turning back around to face Martin from the far side of the plaza before the monastery. The badger circled menacingly. “Are you the one who rules Wharvis?”

“Uh, yes!” Martin bluffed; wiping sweat from his brow. “And, uh... how dare you speak the name of Wharvis aloud? What do you know of him?”

The boy came walking back towards Martin.

“Uh...uh... Nothing, master!” The boy was crying again. “Just that he watches over the monastery while the monks are away...”

Martin the Green hesitated, trying to decide what tack to take next.

“Master! What would you have me do?” the kid asked, fear and sadness mixing in his voice.

“Yeah! Yeah! Tell him to do something! Good idea, Martin! You’re so smart!” Thomas chattered in the watch-mage’s mind, from his hidden spot in the hood of Martin’s cloak.

“Follow me,” Martin said, trying to sound authoritative.

“Do I have to keep pretending to be a zombie?” the young man asked.

“No.”

The zombie warrior scrambled awkwardly to his feet, decaying flesh crumbling away from his joints. With two vicious slashes from his halberd to the legs, Kazrack sent it back down to the ground.

Dorn hurried around the corner to the left-hand alley holding his sword in one hand and a torch in the other, coming to support Ratchis and Kazrack, but then cried out.

“I’m blind! Something cast a spell on me!” he said. “Watch out, if I sense anything near me, I am going to swing at it.”

“I knew it!” Ratchis cried, slicing into the nacreous flesh of the zombie warrior on the ground. “There must be a spell-caster of some kind down that alley!”

Roland bit at the zombie-warrior, wincing each time expecting to taste dead flesh, but the taste of live human blood was well known to him. He was unable to communicate this to his companions.

The zombie-warrior lurched awkwardly to his feet, trying to use his weight to slash across Kazrack’s face, but it only managed to slap its face into Kazrack’s halberd blade. The dwarf took advantage of the distraction and yanked his pole arm in and slashed low again. Again, the zombie-warrior lost his footing and landed heavily.

“Die! Die! Die! Die!” Ratchis roared crazily, bringing his great sword down on the prone zombie-warrior again and again. It stopped moving, and its appearance suddenly changed to that of a tall broad young man with an angular shaved head. “Roland! Go help Gunthar!”

But Gunthar didn’t need help. He shook off a cold feeling that tingled through his muscles when the little ghoul touched him, and thrust both his blades repeatedly into the thing, saying, “You wanna taste of this! How about a taste of that?”

It dropped to the ground, changing into halfling lad in mottled green and white leather armor.

“And why were you pretending to be a zombie? Explain,” Martin was commanding of the confused youth as he led him down the alley to where the fight had been happening.

“Buh... But, don’t you know about the plan?” the kid replied.

“You are trying my patience. Explain!”

“Buh-Because if you act like a zombie everyone will be scared of you and the real zombies will leave you alone, and then you can earn the items of power,” the boy explained.

Kazrack knelt beside the former zombie and called to his gods to close his opponent’s wounds, so that he would not bleed out and allow him to be questioned.

“*Anubis! Askoday!*” a voice called from deep in the left-hand alley, as Ratchis began to creep down it, whispering to Dorn that it was him. The half-orc spotted a dark robed figure slip into a small door in the rear of the monastery, as a cloud of obscuring mist filled the alley.

The zombie-warrior suddenly leapt back to its feet, appearing in its former undead guise once again and slammed Kazrack in the face with a fist. The dwarf scrambled to get his halberd ready.

Roland, who had begun to go check on Gunthar who was gleefully sifting through the halfling’s things, turned around and bit the zombie on the lower leg and tried to pull it off its feet.

“How did this thing get back up?” Ratchis asked, as he burst out of the mist and sliced it across the chest, making a painful looking dent in the thing’s breastplate. Roland took advantage of the distraction and leapt on its back and began to rake it. Kazrack shoved the head of his halberd into the thing’s lower belly.

The zombie slammed Kazrack once again, and the dwarf went down, coughing blood, and then it collapsed again. Once again, it transformed into a pale young man. Roland noticed a long thin wooden bead carved to look like a haggard face that fell from the man’s face. It had been affixed to the bridge of the man’s nose somehow. The Bastite pushed it away with his own nose.

“The mage got away,” Ratchis said, kneeling beside Kazrack to heal him. “He slipped into the monastery.”

Martin walked over, with the other boy in tow. He noticed that dwarf-thing now looked like a very dead, but not undead dwarf.

“What is your name?” he asked the boy. “Who told you about the plan?”

“I’m Eton,” the boy said meekly. “Wharvis recruited me.”

“We should go back to town and re-group,” Kazrack said groggily, conscious once again, but exhausted.

“We cannot get back into town until dawn,” Ratchis reminded him.

“The guard will let us in if we just explain what happened,” Kazrack reasoned.

“Look, I don’t know what the dwarves were like where you came from,” Ratchis began angrily. “But here, and everywhere else in your homeland that I have been they are unyielding and rigid when it comes to rules and the law. You need to get this through your thick dwarven skull.”

Kazrack frowned.

“Tell me everything, and start from the beginning,” Martin said to Eton.

The boy looked around nervously at the others.

“Who are you people?”

“We’re the friggin’ Fearless Manticore Killers,” Gunthar said, coming back to the others, and giving Roland a kick in the rump. The Bastite snarled, “Heh, I’ve heard a pussy make all kinds of sounds, but never heard one snarl.”

Roland roared and it echoed through the silence of the cemetery.

“Perhaps we should at least leave the cemetery and wait by the gate into the tunnel,” Martin suggested. “Eton, you can tell us what you know as we go. Oh, and we are the Keepers of the Gate.”

They gathered up the bodies and their gear and made their way to the steps that led down the cliff face.

Eton haltingly explained that he and some friends had taken to coming to the cemetery not long after the monks disappeared, where they and other town youths would drink, and couples would meet. After real undead began to appear, they were recruited by a wizard named Wharvis who claimed to be watching over the cemetery in the monks’ absence and convinced them to dress as undead to scare off others and to be able to be mistaken as undead by the real ones at a distance. Those who showed the most loyalty and did special “missions” for Wharvis were eventually granted items that gave them the appearance and powers of some undead. He thought Wharvis was someone from town, but he was not sure whom it might be.

"Me and Tanya and Mortimer were waiting for Wharvis and the others to show up and we had a few shots from our flasks, when the ghouls showed up," Eton explained. "Our disguises didn't show up."

"What others?" Martin asked.

"Tipik. He was the halfling with the magic armor that gave him ghoul-powers, and there was Dolan and Tinar, who is a dwarf," Eton explained. "The last two had already been recruited by Wharvis when we met him."

"We are going to have to turn you into the authorities," Martin explained.

"No!"

"You should have thought of that before you started hanging out with ghouls," Gunthar chided him. "Some men will do anything for a ghoul-friend."

Dorn and Martin groaned. Roland, still in panther form, snarled his disapproval at the joke.

"Gunthar has a point, young man," Kazrack said, angrily. "Accept your judgment with dignity."

"I don't wanna! I don't wanna!" Eton made to take back off up the stairs, but Ratchis shot him a glare, and the boy quieted it down, though tears were streaming down his face again.

They had a long wait before the gate would open in the morning.

Osilem, the 17th of Ter – 565 H.E.

The great clang of the tunnel gate rising into position as dawn arrived echoed across the mountain pass. Keepers of the Gate made their way back into Nikar. Etan dragged his feet as he walked and complained that his head hurt and wanted a drink.

The inner portcullis was still closed when the party arrived, so they approached a smaller gated door within the gate. On the other side were two dwarven guards; one of which immediately took off when he saw the party approaching.

"We have a prisoner," Kazrack explained to the guard, when the party was told they would not be allowed through until the captain of the guard arrived. "He is involved in the goings-on in the cemetery. We were coming to speak to the captain, and to the Council as well, if we could, as we have discovered some things that bear investigation."

“Then you will not mind waiting,” the guard replied, and then realizing his rudeness to a rune-thrower, he added. “I’m sure you can understand the need to follow protocol, brother rune-thrower.”

Kazrack nodded.

“I have to warn you,” Ratchis growled to the party in a low voice, as they hung back to wait. “The captain of the guard does not like me very much, and he is likely to take anything I say in the worse possible light.”

They had to wait nearly an hour before the other guard returned with an older dwarf, Captain Marno Lodestone. Lodestone had a curling beard, like tarnished steel, and cold blue eyes that stared from behind the shadow of his gray bushy eyebrows. His shoulders were as wide as Kazrack’s, but his furrowed and cracked brow showed his age.

“Send them through one at a time, starting with the dwarf,” the captain ordered his guards. Ratchis noticed the captain’s eyes fell heavily on him.

Kazrack spied the dwarven captain’s fine suit of chainmail, and cruel-looking hammer at his side. The older dwarf chewed on his lower lip.

“You’re Delver, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Kazrack replied.

“I understand you went up to the Garden of Stones to stir things up?”

“No, sir... I mean, yes, sir... I mean, we went up there, but not to stir things up, but to investigate the disturbances we had heard of,” Kazrack tried to explain.

“Without the leave of the Council...” Kazrack was not sure if this was a question or a statement.

“Um...”

“Do you often do whatever you like in the lawful jurisdiction of a recognized ruling body?” the Captain asked.

“We didn’t realize we needed to ask permission,” Kazrack replied.

The Captain grunted his disapproval.

“We have been spending a lot of time in the wilderness, and before that as contracted helpers for the king of Gothanius, so in both places we have taken a lot initiative. I apologize if the law required us to alert the Council first.”

The Captain grunted again.

“We did discover some strange things going on and there seems to be some wizard manipulating the youth of this town,” Kazrack continued. “It would be prudent for the Council to investigate. We captured one of the youths. It seems they are being encouraged to take the guise of undead. And we have collected some dubious items that might aid this...”

“You can rest assured that the Council will investigate this, and that we are already looking into the allegations and dealing with them in appropriate manner without interfering adventurers, especially a group led by a rapist pig-fucker that no one wanted back here,” Lodestone spat.³⁰

³⁰ See the Story of Ratchis.

“Captain, I mean no disrespect, but I do not appreciate you characterizing my companion, D’nar, as I call him, like that,” Kazrack said. “Despite his blood, he is a good person dedicated to what is right.”

Marno Lodestone spat.

“Who you choose for friends, however unwise, is your own business. But what you do in my town is mine,” He turned to one of the dwarven guards. “Send the watch-mage through next and grab their prisoner while you are at it.”

One by one the members of the Keepers of the Gate were brought through the gate, as the Captain looked each one of them up and down and asked their names, though he seemed to already know them all. The guards held the whimpering Eton between them. More guards, among them two humans, came out of the guardhouse and collected the corpses from out in the tunnel.

Martin passed over the magical items they had collected from the pseudo-undead.

“Be ready to make yourselves available to the Council for an inquiry,” Lodestone said to them. “And any other trouble you get yourselves into will not be taken lightly. That goes double for those of you with records.”

Ratchis stared at the dwarven captain defiantly.

“And get those damn weapons peace-knotted,” the captain added and dismissed them.

Nikar was just beginning to awaken as the party went their separate ways. Ratchis made his way to Mercy’s house, while Roland and Kazrack returned to their respective temples. Martin, Dorn and Gunthar went to their suite at the inn. The first to study some new spells and prepare for training, while the other two just wanted to sleep.

Tholem, the 18th of Ter – 565 H.E.

The next day Dorn and Martin found Gunthar had not returned the night before.

“Probably with that gnome girl,” Dorn said with a wink to the watch-mage. Martin frowned.

They headed down to the common room to get a morning meal. They had barely reached the bottom of the stairs, when Martin remembered a book he had wanted to peruse over breakfast in preparation for the beginning of his studies with Vaysalia. He asked Dorn to order something for him and he hurried back upstairs to retrieve the it. As he came around the corner, he spotted Gunthar coming out of the suite room, closing the door carefully behind him.

“What are you doing?” Martin asked.

Gunthar leapt, startled. He spun around. “Don’t sneak up on a guy!”

“Where have you been?” Martin asked. “What were you doing in the room? You weren’t here a few minutes ago. Where did you come from?”

The watch-mage looked up and down the narrow hall. At the far end it turned to the left, and there was a window on both ends, and five other doors, one of which he knew led to the only other set of suite rooms in the Inn of Friendly Flame.

“I uh... started opening the door when I realized you guys might still be sleeping, so I closed it back quietly to not wake you, deciding to get some friggin’ breakfast,” Gunthar said, his voice gaining confidence as each word came out. “What are you, me dad? If so, let me know I have an overdue appointment with yer Ma.”

“You are so foul,” Martin sneered, going past the Neergaardian to enter the suite. “Anyway, Dorn and I are having breakfast below. I am just going to get a book. You can join us if you like.”

Gunthar turned towards the stairs.

Martin closed the door behind him and looked around. He was certain something was different. He stepped into the rear bedroom and immediately noticed that his bed, which had been immaculately made not too long before was now slightly ruffled.

He walked over and knelt beside the bed and lifted the cover. Beneath, beside his spare set of boots, were three black metal vases with hinged metal covers sealed with wax.

Martin dragged one out. It was heavy. He broke the wax with his dagger and then pried it open with the blade. Martin's eyes opened wide. Within, the vase was a black shiny mineral-like powder. There was a faint smell of magnesium to it. Closing the vase back up, he hefted it and brought it over to Gunthar's bed, and he slid it beneath. He did the same with the other two.

A few moments later, Martin the Green came down to see two dwarven town guards had just come into the common room from the outside. They walked over to talk with Huggert.

Dorn was sitting alone.

"Where's Gunthar?" Martin asked.

"I don't know I haven't seen him," Dorn shrugged.

"Martin the Green?" the two dwarven guards had walked over to their table.

"Yes?"

Ratchis and Mercy were eating lunch at her house when suddenly Gunthar came banging at the door.

"Let me in! Let me in!"

"It's open," Mercy said, rolling her eyes and then winking at Ratchis.

The Neergaardian warrior came in hurriedly and slammed the door behind him and slipped the bolt.

"You gotta hide me! I want sanctuary!" Gunthar demanded, his eyes darting around for a place to hide.

"What have you done now?" Ratchis asked casually.

"I ain't done nothing," Gunthar swore. "All I know is I was stopping back by the inn to get some more coin, and as I entered the common room I heard some town guards asking about me, and where I might be. The damn bartender pointed right at me, but I think I ducked out before they got a good look."

"You led them here?" Anger crept into Mercy's voice. She walked over to the window and looked out from behind the curtain. At that same moment, there was a knock on the door.

"I'll take care of this," Ratchis said, opening the door. There stood two dwarven town guards in chain mail, holding halberds at their side.

"You are the half-blood, Ratchis of Nephthys?" one of the guards asked.

"Yes."

“You are summoned before the Ruling Council of Nikar. You are to come immediately,” the guard continued. “If any of your other companions are here with you, they are summoned as well.”

Ratchis looked back inside to see Gunthar peeking out from behind Mercy.

“Gunthar, you’re an idiot,” Ratchis barked. “Come on.”

Gunthar stood and came out, “Oh, yeah, I forgot about that.”

The half-orc and the Neergaardian followed the two guards to the Council Hall.

As they came past the four marble columns, into the tiled lobby of the building, they noticed that Dorn and Martin were being escorted in as well. They were led through a set of large oaken doors carved with a stylistic rendition of the town’s charter. Beyond was a round theatre-like chamber. Upon a dais was a long and high table, behind which sat eight figures. Several rows of tiered seating faced the dais, at the front Roland and Kazrack already sat.

Narrow windows at the ceiling sent wedge-shaped beams of light across the room, illuminating it. The whole place was dressed in marble and adorned with white tapestries. A burgundy flag hung above the dais. It showed the sigil of Nikar, a stylized silver icon of a fortified town upon a mountain.

Captain Marno Lodestone stood at the bottom of the stairs to the dais and called up as they approached down the aisle. “Come and take some seats in the front!”

The Captain walked up onto the dais and took the last empty seat, near the right side.

“Welcome to this special session of the Nikar Ruling Council on all Lawful Matters,” said a tall man with a sallow look and yellowed skin. He had scrubby graying hair, and long fingers with swollen joints. He opened his mouth widely when he talked, enunciating every word very slowly. “This session was called by Council Member Marno Lodestone. Which other two did affirm his request?”³¹

“I have,” said a woman in a high-collared long-sleeved lavender dress. She wore a veil of purple silk over her face. She sat near the center of the table.

“As have I,” said a brown-haired dwarf with a cropped beard that made Kazrack uncomfortable to look at. He had a weathered face and narrow eyes. He had a burn scar where his right eyebrow should have been.

“Let the record show that honored council members Coral Humilia and Grad Almondach have seconded the opening of this special session,” the tall thin man said. “Now, Councilor Lodestone, will you re-acquaint us with the matter at hand.”

“This group, alternately calling themselves ‘the Fearless Manticore Killers’ and the ‘Keepers of the Gate,’” the Captain began. “Have admitted to entering the Garden of Stones and attacking young townspeople, who while misdirected in their actions would have been better served to have been brought in by the lawful authority to pay for any crimes they might have been committing.”

“So, you are accusing them of doing what you and our own town guard should have been doing?” said a woman with her black hair in two thick braids on either side of her head, and several smaller beaded braids in the middle. She had bronze skin and large brown eyes. She wore a strap-less white dress decorated with golden buttons that matched the fancy golden comb in her hair. She wore a silver ankh about her neck, it was etched with a quarter moon.

“Councilor Lydia,” A the chubby figure in green robes at the right end of the table began. He was bald except for tufts of black hair behind each ear, and a well-kept goatee. His face was flush, though he smiled when he spoke. It

³¹ The Ruling Council of Nikar requires at least two of the remaining eight members to affirm the call for a special session for the group to actually meet.

was Mylor.³² “You know very well that you have done your best to block Councilor Lodestone every time he has petitioned the council to set up a permanent guard in the cemetery while the monks of Anubis are absent.”

“Some things are the jurisdiction of a church, not this council,” Lydia replied.

The tall thin man hammered his gavel down.

“We are here to get to the bottom of the events of the night previous,” He was Yeeger Salamander, a local merchant that owned a controlling interest in the town salt mine. “Any other items need to be added to the regular agenda by the normal means. Now...” He paused.

A cleanly dressed young man in a gray jacket and a black bowtie, wearing spectacles entered the room and climbed up to the dais, putting some papers down in front of Yeeger. Martin recognized him as the man he had seen lurking around outside of Daphne’s house. Even as he thought of her Daphne entered the chambers and sat on the other side of the aisle from the party with some people Martin could only assume were the rest of the Council’s staff.

Councilor Salamander looked up from reading the papers. “Yes, well... We will ask that you accompany my aide to a waiting room, and we will see you one at a time. Roland of Bast, you may stay as we will question you first.”

One by one the members of the party were questioned by the Council; after each of them were done they were led to a different room from where the others were waiting to be questioned.

“Roland, my dear, however did you get involved with this rag-tag band of questionable origins?” the woman in behind the veil, Coral Humilia asked, familiarly.

“I met the half-orc, Ratchis through Mercy of Nephthys,” Roland replied.

“Oh, Mercy,” Coral said, scathingly.

“Mercy is a lovely girl, definitely her parents’ child, I would take her vouchsafe on these fellows,” Lydia said, smiling.

“Hmph,” Lodestone cleared his throat and looked at Roland, frowning. “And why would you take part in so-called ‘adventuring’ activities when as a resident you know the restrictions on those kinds of things without the approval of the Council. I am sure you are aware of the town’s history?”

“Yes, Captain Lodestone, I am aware of what happened,”³³ Roland said, allowing just the slightest bit of annoyance to creep into his otherwise polite tone. “But it is not what it seems. My new companions lost one of their number on the journey here; a paladin dedicated to Anubis. And they felt they owed it to his memory to check out the cemetery and make sure it was not being desecrated. We were only going to look around when we were attacked.”

“Only going to look around? All fully armed and armored?” Lodestone asked.

“It is a dangerous world, Captain,” Roland replied smugly.

“No one knows it better than I do,” the Captain said, gruffly.

They then asked Roland to retell the events in the cemetery in his own words and then he was excused. Kazrack was called in next.

³² See Session #69

³³ In 558 H.E. a feud between rival powerful adventuring parties in the central tier led to the death of several townsfolk and structural damage to several buildings. This happened in the first campaign run in Aquerra, using the then new second edition rules.

Asked to tell of the event of two nights ago, Kazrack began with an anecdote from his childhood and then began to explain the series of events that led him to return to Derome-Delem. He had gotten as far as the death of Malcolm when he was interrupted.

“Is there a point to this?” asked Councilor Almondach, the hill dwarf.

“Excuse me, sir, I just wanted to make sure you understood all the circumstances that led to my companions and I arriving at the cemetery the night before last. Surely, only with a full set of facts can any decision be reached,” Kazrack said.

“Anyway, I most indeedly did like that story very much! Oh yes, the goblin witch-doctor, very scary!” the gnome sitting beside Lydia said. He had wispy golden hair, and skin like rich black earth, with a prodigious nose that held spectacles of very thick glass. He wore a green coat and a yellow shirt, and his soft maroon boots were up on the table, as he leaned back in his chair. But now he leaned forward and pointed at Kazrack. “But carry on, what about this Crumb? He seems like rather a shady fellow.”

“As entertaining and informative as this is, I think we are going to have insist that master Kazrack skip ahead to the events in question. We all have busy schedules that we had to put aside for this meeting,” Mylor said with affected exhaustion in his voice.

“Yes, I think it suffice to ask about your companion...” Lydia looked down at her notes. “Beorth? Yes, that is it. And what he has to do with what happened the other night.”

“He had nothing to do with it,” Kazrack said. “He was lost on the journey here from Gothanius, but if he had been with us, he might have given us better instruction on how to handle the situation, the undead being his area of expertise... destroying them, not commanding them or creating them or anything like that...”

“Is it safe to say that if Beorth were still with you he would have known more about local laws and this type of thing, being a paladin?” Lydia asked.

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked Lodestone.

“Obviously, this group was used to relying on their former companion for direction in terms of obeying the law, or I should say the regulations of our multi-racial charter, as I would not presume to tell you honorable rune-thrower about dwarven law,” Lydia motioned to Kazrack. The dwarf stood and bowed awkwardly. “In the grief and confusion of losing him, they cannot be expected to follow the letter of a law they were probably never properly informed of by your bullying guards. And in the end, what harm have they done?”

“This is no time to impugn the integrity of the townguard, Councilor Lydia,” said the halfling sitting at the far left of the table. He smoked a pipe and had long brown curly locks that he had to brush out of his eyes repeatedly. He was very very fat, and his name was Reed Flapcorn. “Though I have to agree with you that along with the testimony of that Eton boy, this is much ado about nothing, and I have a batch of my brew just a day away from perfect maturation, I should be tasting it by the hour, not here with your usual crusade against adventurers.”

“So, Master Kazrack, what is your answer?” Lydia asked.

“Um, I am not sure what the question is, ma’am,” Kazrack replied, confusedly.

“Would you have investigated the cemetery if not for your former companion, Beorth?”

“I never thought twice about human cemeteries or monks of Anubis or any of that before I met Beorth.”

“I am satisfied with his testimony,” Lydia said.

“But he hasn’t said anything yet,” complained Captain Lodestone.

"I think between what he has said and the fact that High Priest Bedkorak spoke up for him is enough for us," said Lydia.

"I agree," said the other dwarf.

Lodestone sighed, and then excused Kazrack.

"Oh and come down to Fizzlepop's some night and you can finish your story, I'll buy you an ale or twelve," the gnome called to Kazrack as the dwarf left. "Just ask around for me, I'm Tromaglerhammergleengloventart, also known as the Mayor of the Gnomish Quarter."

"That title has no meaning by the by-laws and charter of Nikar," added Yeeger in his flat voice.

Dorn was questioned next and after him came Martin the Green.

"First, Martin, I would like to say I am glad to finally meet you, though these are not the ideal circumstances. I am sure we will have a time to talk when this is all over," Lydia said with a bright smile. Daphne waved at Martin as she came up beside the priestess to take away from papers that had just been signed.

"I am sorry if our ignorance led us to violate any local statutes," Martin replied. "But regardless of the circumstances, it is always a pleasure to meet a lady of the cloth of Isis."

"Were you acting on the orders of the Academy of Wizardry, which I assume you represent, when you came to Nikar to investigate the cemetery?" the Captain was right down to business.

"Well, I do in a way represent the Academy in terms of my actions; thus, I always seek to act ethically, but in terms any specific reason that I am in Nikar, or that my companions and I went to investigate the undead sightings in the Garden of Stones has no direct connection to the Academy."

"And why did you come to Nikar?" asked the extremely gaunt elf sitting to the left of Mylor. The elf's hair was a long bluish-black tied back, and his skin had an alabaster sheen to it. He had long sharp features without a crease or wrinkle that still seemed to suggest a great age. He had big green eyes. It was Sherinian Felestas, who Martin had met a few days before and had done business with.³⁴

"I came specifically to seek training and lore that would help in my larger mission," Martin replied. "As did the rest of my companions."

"As did the one called Gunthar Northrop?" asked the golden-haired gnome.

"Um, yes... I believe he was also, uh... especially looking forward to some rest and relaxation," Martin smiled weakly, but the gnome returned a broad smile, and twisted the ends of his mustache.

"Martin, would you characterize the items you found on these false undead to be evil items?" Lydia asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Martin replied. "The people who wielded them appeared as undead while using them and displayed powers characteristically that of undead."

"Do you remember whose idea it was first to go to the cemetery?" Lodestone asked.

"Um... we kind of came to the idea as a group," Martin said. "Though I read the news here in the Council Hall about the undead, and it was Roland that informed us about the youth spending their nights in the cemetery."

"And how did he find out?" Mylor asked.

³⁴ See Session #69

"I do not know," Martin said. "But I assumed it was merely rumors about town."

"Do you often take actions based on rumors heard in town without affirming them with the just authority of the town you reside in?" Captain Lodestone asked angrily.

"It was an error in judgment," Martin replied.

"You met with Councilor Mylor several days ago, did you not?" asked Sherinian Felestas.

"Uh, yes... briefly..."

"Why did you not confer with him then about this plan of yours?" the elf continued.

"I did not know then that the group wanted to go look into it."

"So, it was someone else's idea?" asked Captain Lodestone. "Perhaps the half-orc's?"

"No more his idea than anyone else's," replied Martin.

"What, may I ask, is your central mission? I assume it is at the behest of the Academy?" asked Mylor, sitting up straight and smoothing his green and yellow silk robes.

"Well, it was because of what I was doing at the behest of the Academy that I got involved in what my companions and I are trying to fix," Martin said, cryptically.

"And that is?"

"I cannot divulge that, for reasons that should be clear. It is dangerous for me and for others for too many people to know, and certainly not as part of a public record."

"Yes..."

"How convenient," said Lodestone.

"Martin, did you get to examine the items you and your companions retrieved from the slain?" Lydia asked, her tone was never less than friendly, and at times become almost motherly.

"Only cursorily," Martin replied. "They seem to be of evil make though and have necromantic and transmutative energies bound to them."

"Yes, they do. Mylor and I both independently verified that," she shot the necromancer a disapproving look. "So now I must ask you straight out, what do you think is happening?"

"Well, I have been thinking it over as I have been waiting, and I really cannot make much sense of it," Martin began. "If someone wanted to take advantage of the monks absence to rob graves or even the monastery itself why create undead and draw undue attention? And why attract youths there to recruit? Except perhaps to make more undead, but it still not clear if the ghouls Kazrack destroyed upon entering the cemetery were working for this Wharvis person, for they did seem to be after Eton. Speaking of Eton, what did he say?"

"That is not part of the public record of yet," Lodestone answered abruptly.

Lydia sighed, "The misdirected young man did not give much in the way of useful testimony. It seems he was inebriated during most of his meetings with Wharvis."

"But what about the monks?" asked Tromaglerhammergeleengloventart. "The ones your companion, Gunthar claimed to have seen."

“You’ve spoken to Gunthar?” asked Martin, confused because he knew Gunthar still waited to be questioned.

“Huh?” the so-called Mayor of the Gnomish Quarter coughed and looked around nervously. “No. The sighting of the monks by Gunthar was mentioned by Roland of Bast.”

“There has been no word of monks coming through the east gate,” the Captain said. “I think the monks are a ruse.”

“They could have come up through the south gate by way of the western road,” Reed Flapcorn offered.

“Gunthar did say they were leaving that way,” Martin added.

“What do you plan to do about this Wharvis next?” Lydia asked.

“Honestly, now that the Council is taking an active interest in this, I would rather concentrate on my studies, and do not plan to pursue it unless, of course, the Council needed my aid in some way,” Martin replied.

“And your companions? Do they plan to do the same?” Captain Lodestone asked, accusingly.

“I believe they would,” Martin said. “Our hearts are all heavy with the tasks before us that just may claim our lives. We have much preparation to do... But again, we will help if help is needed.”

“Thank you, Martin. It may come to that, but we shall see,” replied Lydia. “Though I would like to help you with your tasks, if I can. After these proceedings, wait until after and we will talk.”

Mylor sneered.

Gunthar was sent for after Martin was shown out to the other waiting area, and finally it was Ratchis’ turn.

“It makes my heart heavy to have to see you again under these circumstances,” Lydia said to the half-orc. “Perhaps it is too soon for you to be back?”

“Some folk don’t know when to stay gone when they got the chance to be gone,” Captain Lodestone spat.

“Common beasts know no better, their noses lead them back to where they were fed.” Mylor held a kerchief to his face.

Yeeger hammered his gavel down twice. “Ratchis Orc-blood was exonerated of his previous charges and there was no official exile. The unfortunate events of the past have no bearing on this case.”

“Or do they?” Lodestone stood, suddenly very angry. “Perhaps this orc-blood can tell us what he knows of Mortimor Karlton?”

“Who?” asked Ratchis, though there was something about the name.

“Oh, so you claim to not know who that is?” Lodestone asked.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. Could it have been someone I worked with at the mine?”

“You know very well that it wasn’t,” Lodestone replied. “Mortimor Karlton is the nephew of Bevis Karlton.”³⁵

“Oh.” Ratchis was quiet for a long moment. “Has something happened to Mortimor?”

“So, you do know him?” Reed, the halfling asked.

³⁵ Bevis Karlton was the man whose wife accused Ratchis of raping her to hide the fact of their affair. (See the Story of Ratchis)

“No, but I assume something must have happened or the Captain would not be looking at me as if I had killed someone.”

“You did kill someone,” Mylor said. “At least three someones, and you took their things and brought it to us; that is why we are here.”

“Mortimor is among the missing young people of the town,” Lydia said. “There were two before, and now Mortimor and Tanya who were with Eton in the cemetery the night you found him there.”

“You think I went to the cemetery because I knew Mortimor was there?” Ratchis asked incredulously. “And that I brought my party with me, the ranks of which include a watch-mage and a dwarven priest, to go get revenge on someone through their nephew?”

“We do not all think so,” Lydia replied.

“And it does not seem very likely... No, No, No it doesn’t. Uh-uh.” Said the gnome councilor, rubbing the end of his nose with a calloused finger, as he shook his head back and forth.

“As much as I detest his beastly kind, it does seem far-fetched,” Mylor said, the sound of disgust never leaving his haughty voice. “I think we have wasted enough time here.”

“Ratchis, you may join your companions and then you will all be called back in for our decision,” Lydia said, with a smile.

It was less and a half hour later when they were all called back. They spent the time discussing what they had been asked, and what they had said, except for Gunthar who was unusually quiet.

They stood before the dais. “Keepers of the Gate,” Yeeger began, slapping his gavel on the table once half-heartedly. “We have discussed the issue at hand and have come to the following conclusion. Councilor Lydia, if you will.”

“We have decided not to hold you on any of these deaths, in light of your returning the cursed items and the corpses, and of course cooperating with this inquiry,” Lydia said, smiling. “However, we are going to have to officially ask that you do not continue your own independent inquiry into the goings on in the cemetery, and that you avoid any and all so-called ‘adventuring’ activities in the area of Nikar or using this town as a base. If we need your help or need you for further questioning, we will contact you.”

“But please let me remind you that you will be watched, and you will be held responsible for any and all damages done to the town or its populace that happens while others seek retaliation or revenge upon you,” Captain Lodestone added in his gravelly voice.

“Any questions?” Yeeger Salamander asked.

The party had no response.

“Very well, then, you are free to go,” Yeeger said.

The Council began to disperse.

“I’m going ta have a friggin’ drink,” Gunthar said.

“Good idea,” said Roland, following him out.

"I must return to the temple. I have duties tonight," Kazrack said.

Lydia came around the table and off the dais and approached Martin and Ratchis. Dorn hung back.

"Martin, I am so sorry that we were so delayed in meeting," Lydia said, putting her hand out daintily. Martin shook it. "Please come by my house tomorrow for lunch and we will discuss how I can help you. I have ever been a friend of the Academy of Wizardry, and I know Alexandra the Lavender well."

"Thank you," Martin said.

"Lady Lydia, I was hoping I might speak to you a moment alone," Ratchis asked, trying to sound as gentle as possible. The priestess of Isis was taken aback and momentarily frowned. Ratchis could not tell if it was surprise or disgust. He looked over at Martin, who excused himself.

Lydia shifted uncomfortably and looked at Ratchis and then down at the floor.

"Uh, I was wondering if you knew what ever happened to Madaline," Ratchis asked meekly. "I mean, is she still in town."

Lydia looked up at Ratchis with pity in her brown eyes. "Do you not think that some things are best left alone? She left long ago, and I do not know where, but her husband, he is still around somewhere."

Ratchis looked down dejectedly and left.

End of Session #71

Session #72 ³⁶

Martin climbed slowly up the narrow stone spiral steps. Each step seemed a great effort, and shadowy forms on close walls leered at him with fearful resentment, their eyes glowing yellow and red. No people could cast shadows such as those, only undead shades rippling in the smoky torchlight of the stairway looked that way. Panting, and clutching the Book of Black Circles to his chest, Martin could sense something foul crawling up the stairs behind him; not in pursuit, but casually rising as if it were a sapient mist that was certain it would catch the watch-mage soon enough.

The stairway opened onto a narrow hall, and immediately to the right there was a stone door etched with the sign of a gnarled hand, its two smallest fingers replaced with a long narrow suckered tentacle that reached down across the palm and around the wrist.

It was the Sign of the Corruptor.

Martin pushed open the door, certain it was the only safe place in whatever labyrinth of horror he found himself. He slammed the door behind him and looked around the dark room. He could hear scuttling insects scampering across the stone walls and floor, and a soft creaking. Before him was a desk made of blackened bones, on the front of which were mounted the stripped spines of four men and one woman, faces of rotting flesh still atop them. A dull greasy light emanated from the low ceiling, illuminating the desk. Unable to stop himself he walked over to the desk and placed the book atop it.

The soft creaking grew louder as whoever sat behind the desk was leaning forward into the sickly light, but Martin kept his eyes on the book. He rubbed his right hand against the raised metallic circles on the book's cover made of blacked human hide and let out a long slow sigh, and then raised his eyes to meet the gaze of who he knew to be the book's true master.

³⁶ This session was played Saturday, January 10, 2004.

Sitting behind the desk a figure in a black velvet robe leaned forward. Its face was a bleached skull upon which was a scrap of painted rotted flesh tacked onto the clinging bits of meat by means of jeweled pins. It reached out with a bony hand for the Book of Black Circles, gray flesh melting off its tentacled fingers, as some kind of razor-backed slug dug its way out of the back of his hand and onto the desk. A second of these black maggots crawled out of the jagged mouth hole of the false face and burrowed into its right eye, which was stitched across its length. The left eye was embedded with a myriad of tiny glowing gems and rolled loosely in the skull.

Martin knew instinctively, it was Marchosias the Corruptor.

Marchosias turned the book around to face him, and then looking up at Martin, moved an emerald-headed pin to tack the painted piece of torn flesh that served for his face into a horrific parody of a smile. He opened the Book of Black Circles, running a sharpened bony finger along the words and diagrams. He stopped three distinct times and then snapping the book shut, turned it back around to face Martin, and pushed it towards the watch-mage.

Martin the Green was frozen in fear. Unable to speak or even turn away from the horrible person before him, he had to see the dreadful face look at him again and hear the cold hissing voice issue from the skull behind the flesh mask.

"There is much you can learn from this book that can be put to good use in your quest," Marchosias said. "There is much you can learn from it even as you sleep. One hundred and thirteen, ninety-seven and twelve; seek these pages and the spells you may learn there will open up the mysteries of the next House. And you may visit me here again, to learn more..."³⁷

Balem, the 19th of Ter – 565 H.E.

Martin awoke with a start. He was leaning over on a desk in the common suite room, where he had been studying late into the night. Groggily he straightened up and looked down at what he had been working on. The Book of Black Circles was on the desk. He leapt up in fear and turned and looked around, confusedly.

Sighing, he took up the book, wrapped it up and put it away.

The suite door opened and Gunthar tiptoed in.

"I am awake, Gunthar," Martin whispered, figuring Dorn was still asleep in the next room.

"Good!" Gunthar said, his face turning from surprised to friendly. He flashed a smile and brushed his ever-shaggy blonde hair behind his ear. He was dressed in an open sailcloth shirt, and black breeches covered in stains of splashed ale. "You're who I wanted to talk to. There was something of mine in the suite, and..."

"I moved your pots of smoke-powder under your bed," Martin replied. "I did not appreciate you endangering me like that."

"Oh, we're all in danger right now," Gunthar replied. "There is enough in those things to knock the second story off this place. But keep it down, I'm not supposed to have it. I kinda got it on the sly."

"And you hid it with my things, because..."

"Because with all the guards snooping around, I figured you might not be searched or could explain it off as part of your magic stuff or something. I appreciate your help," Gunthar said smiling. "But you aren't going to tell Snuffles and Stumpy are you? Because they can ruin everything and then conveniently forget they made a deal."

"Deal?"

³⁷ **DM's Note:** The categorization of spells by level are called the "Houses" of magic in Aquerra, with a 'Wizard of the 5th House' being either a 10th or 11th level wizard.

“To destroy the dragon together and split the reward,” Gunthar said. “I help you with this Maze of Whoever stuff and in return you help me with my plan with the dragon. The you-know-what is for the Kan-on. We’re gonna punch a hole in that dragon so big you’ve be able to see through to the moon.”

Gunthar laughed, and Martin noticed the Neergaardian was still drunk despite it being morning.

“You cannot leave them here,” Martin replied.

“Oh, don’t worry Martin, I already have a better hiding place until we’ll leave,” Gunthar replied, giving Martin a playful punch in the jaw that made the watch-mage bite his tongue. “Just don’t tell Stumpy and Snuffles. At least not until we leave town.”

“I will conthider it,” Martin said, wincing at the coppery taste of blood in his mouth.

“Eh, I’m sacking out,” Gunthar said, obviously annoyed at Martin’s non-committal reply. He walked towards the bedrooms. “I’ll move the pots this afternoon.”

Later that day Martin headed over to Lydia’s house for lunch. The house was large with white stucco walls and support beams painted a bright magenta and carved with runes and frills in gold paint. The sitting room doubled as a shrine to Isis, with a small altar flanked by statues of the goddess of motherhood and magic.

There was a small dining area with a large window facing the edge of the town’s upper tier. Sunlight soaked the room. Here Martin told Isis the long tale of the Keepers of the Gate, from his arrival in Gothanius to map room of the Pit of Bones, and finally wandered back around to the subject of the Book of Black Circles.

“It is hard to believe you have such powerful item of magic bent for evil in your possession,” Lydia said. Her long black hair was in two thick braids decorated with red ribbons and silver beads. She smiled easily, but it showed soft lines of age and stress under her eyes and around her full lips. She brought a teacup to her mouth and slurped a long last sip. “I mean, this is something any priestess of my order would give her life to destroy.”

“Well, fortunate for your order Osiris has chosen me as the means of destruction,” Martin replied.

“Still, it is my duty to help you in whatever way I can,” Lydia replied. “I must admit, however, your lore on Marchosias most likely surpasses mine.”

Martin did not reply, trying hard to hide his disappointment.

“May I see it?” Lydia asked.

“I am not sure that is a good idea,” Martin said.

Lydia frowned.

“The Book’s power grows, as I have told you, I dreamt of him last night, and when my companion Ratchis first touched it he sensed that it tried to steal a piece of his life-force,” Martin said.

“Perhaps that is wise, and perhaps there is another way I can help you,” Lydia stood and walked out through the kitchen into the house’s back rooms. She returned a few moments later with a brass scroll tube. “This is a scroll I awarded for service to the priesthood of Isis. It would allow me to commune with her, or more likely one of her more powerful celestial servants, on your behalf. You and your companions can prepare a list of ten questions.”

“That would be a great gift!” Martin smiled.

"I think I have a bottle of wine I can open to celebrate for the occasion," Lydia said. "I am honored to be of even a little help to such a noble effort."

She walked back into the kitchen. Martin could hear her banging around in some cabinets looking for the wine. "It should be on the coming Isilem," she called. "In the evening, after vespers. It would be the most auspicious time and would give you and your friends time to prepare what queries you may have of the higher realms about your plight."

"Thank you, again," Martin replied.

Martin the Green was tipsy by the time he left, giggling with Thomas as he made his way back to Mercy's house to tell Ratchis the news of the aid.

As Ratchis spent his day with Mercy learning the mysteries of more powerful spells now available to him from Nephthys, Roland spent his day wandering in and around the grounds of the Council Hall in the form of small black house cat, snooping here and there.

After a morning of finding nothing but some small fish fed to him by Reed Flapcorn's aid, Roland wandered to Mylor's upper tier home to snoop around there, but the large barking dogs let loose behind the low wall surround his property quickly dissuaded him. Instead, after lunch he returned to the Council Hall and scoured the public records of the Council's meetings for anything he thought might give away some misdoings on the part of all or some of the ruling council.

He found nothing but the patterns of voting among the members, and the usual alliances and conflicts. Disappointed, he returned to the temple of Bast to clean up and prepare for dinner at the Inn of Friendly Flame with the rest of the companions that could make it.

On his way out, Toni, the temple's public contact stopped him. She was a tall stick of a woman with powdery white skin and jet-black hair. She wore a soft white robe and had a towel about her neck.

"Brother Roland! Do you happen to be going to the Inn of Friendly Flame?" she asked, stroking a cat in her arms.

"Why, yes, Sister Toni, I indeed plan to go," Roland replied.

"Could you bring this message to Sister Norena? I believe she is there, and I was about to bathe and would prefer to not have to get dressed," she pointed her hip towards Roland, motioning for him to reach into a robe pocket.

He pulled out a small square of paper folder over twice.

"Now this is for her eyes only," Toni said with a wide smile and a raised eyebrow. "I know you must be curious, Bast knows I was, but you mustn't."

"I am offended that you even suggest such a thing," Roland replied with a flourish and an over-dramatized sensitivity, and then threw her a wink as he took off for the inn.

He was barely out of the sight of the temple when he opened the folded paper and looked at it.

It read: *Norena, RTR in trouble. Gather the others and meet him in Pissville.*

Roland folded it back up and continued to the inn.

The Inn of Friendly Flame was crowded with the usual evening revelers. Ratchis and Mercy sat at a table with Martin and Dorn, a space remaining open for Roland, but he spied Norena by the bar with Razzle Greyish and a broad brown-haired man wearing a stylized silver tome engraved with an ankh about his neck.

Roland approached them, and after an exaggerated kissing greeting, he gave her the note and joined the others at the table.

“Kazrack won’t be able to join us as often now that his training has begun and he is working on his armor in his spare time,” Ratchis said.

“I am beginning some training of my own beginning the day after we use Lydia’s help,” Martin added. “But I will come by every few days to check on how your reading is going, Ratchis. And we can go over more of the orcish inflection.”³⁸

“Well, my investigations into the Council have not gotten off to a very good start, but I have happened upon some other news,” Roland said, bringing his voice to a near whisper as he poured himself some wine.

“Best to leave the Council alone,” Martin said.

“I agree,” added Ratchis. “We do not want to accidentally get embroiled in something that might delay our return to Greenreed Valley when the Maze opens.”

“Oh fine!” Roland rolled his eyes dramatically and took a long sip of his wine. “But what am I supposed to do while you are all doing your studying and training? This town is boring! Why do you think I am joining you?”

“To do the right thing?” Ratchis sneered.

“Yes, well... that, too.”

“So, what is it you found out?” Mercy asked.

“Hold on a minute,” Roland gestured with his chin towards the bar, and then took another sip of wine. Norena was coming over.

“Oh, sweetheart!” She wrapped her arms around Roland’s neck and shoulders from behind and gave him an exaggerated kiss on the cheek. “I was so hoping we’d have time for a drink or three tonight, but it seems the message you brought me brings bad news to all of Nikar.”

“It does?” Roland leaned back to look at her.

“Well, it seems I must collect my companions and leave this very evening before the gate is closed,” Norena explained, pulling up a seat and helping herself to Roland’s wine. “A dear friend of ours is in trouble and we must go pull his ass from the fire once again.”

“Who is this friend?” Roland asked.

Norena put a finger to Roland’s lips. “Shhh! Best not to tell too much,” she replied. “I would have invited you along, but since you have thrown your lot in with these, uh... fine people...”

“Yes, it is unfortunate that timing would not allow me to help you help your friend,” Roland replied. “But things have a way of working out, Bast willing.”

“Well, I must go and prepare,” Norena said, standing again. “It was lovely to meet you all. Mercy, we must have lunch when I return one day.”

³⁸ Martin the Green was teaching Ratchis to read, and in return Ratchis was teaching him how to speak in orcish.

The priestess of Bast turned to the bar, “Razzle! Cordell! I will meet you in front of the temple in two hours’ time.” And with that, she was gone blowing kisses to those who drunkenly waved good-bye.

“Okay, you know the friend she says she going to go help?” Roland asked. He waited until the others grudgingly nodded, playing along. “It is... if I am not mistaken, and I have understood everything you have told me about you journeys... it is... Richard the Red.”

“What?” Ratchis scowled.

“She received a message at the temple, and I brought it to her,” Roland said.

“You read the message!” Martin was shocked.

“Of course,” Now it was Roland’s chance to sneer. “I would love the luxury of following the more superficial customs of honor, but I know that every priest and page in that temple that touched that note, read that note, and you don’t get far in the gossip hall of the church of Bast without knowing everything you can about everyone you can.”

“You cannot have freedom without trust,” Mercy said, looking faintly disgusted. Ratchis nodded.

“Well, that is why you are Friars and I serve a more subtle goddess, no offense,” Roland replied, softening his tone as he spoke. “Anyway, the note said, ‘R-T-R’. Richard the Red.”

“R-T-R could mean anyone or anything,” Ratchis responded.

“Ah! Perhaps if that was the only clue, but the note also said to meet him in ‘Pissville’,” Roland leaned back and smiled broadly.

“So? You know where this Pissville is?” Ratchis asked.

Roland sighed. “It’s slang! Some of the old Cant,” Roland was exasperated. “‘Pisspot’ or ‘pissant’, it means small time, little, not worth it... As in, the Little Kingdoms, where Richard the Red is...”

“Seems like a tenuous connection,” Martin said.

Roland’s shoulders sagged.

“I thought Norena was a companion of Alexandra the Lavender, why would she associate with a rogue watchmage,” Martin asked.

“You don’t know Norena,” Roland poured more wine, his smile and good mood totally drained by the unexpected dubious reaction to his news. “No one tells her to do anything and who her friends are, least of all some distant authority that has no hold over her, like the Academy of Wizardry.”

“Well, even if your guess is right, there is nothing we can do about it,” Ratchis said. “We continue along the way we planned. We train and provision ourselves and then go back. No distractions. No sidetreds.”

Roland sighed again. “So bored...”

“I have something you can help me with tomorrow, if you are looking for something to do,” Martin said to the Bastite.

“What’s that?”

“I want you to help me test the extent of the effect on my spell-casting that the Book of Black Circles,” Martin replied, matter-of-factly.

Anulem, the 20th of Ter – 565 H.E.

The next morning found Martin and Roland in the Garden of Stones Cemetery.

“Are you sure this is a good site for this?” Roland asked, looking around nervously.

“Well, we can’t do it in town by law, and rightly so, and you told me yourself there are outlying farmhouses out past the southwestern gate. This is the only place we can be guaranteed to be alone and there be no one around to be accidentally hurt,” Martin explained.

“What do you want me to do?” Roland asked.

“I want you to create a magical circle of protection against evil for me to stand in and stand ready to dispel magic as I cast some spells to see if the Book’s influence overtakes me as it did a few times already,” Martin replied.³⁹

“I shall do my best.” Roland said. “But first. . . “

Calling to Bast, Roland summoned a golden lion to stand guard as they experimented. Roland leaned close to it, stroking its mane, and whispering something in its ear.⁴⁰

And so, Martin the Green began casting various spells he had prepared, starting with simple spells of the First and Second House, and then working his way up. As chanted to summon a Celestial Dire Preying Mantis he felt a wave of cold swell up and down his body and out his hands, the minute and detailed movements of his fingers, slowing, and before him in blast of red and black fire appeared a huge mottled red preying mantis, the smell of burning copper and sulfur wafting up from it.

“Oh my!” Martin exclaimed.

“Dismiss it!” Roland cried, as his lion guard roared in disapproval.

In a moment it was gone.

“I don’t think the circle of protection helped,” said Martin.

“At least you didn’t lose consciousness or control of yourself when it happened, and you didn’t exude a shield of green and black fire,” Roland said. “That’s something.”

“I guess...” Martin trailed off. “I guess it can be a safe assumption that I should not try summoning spells anymore, and necromantic are probably off limits, too.

Roland shrugged his shoulders. “At least not unless it is an emergency.”

Martin nodded.

Isilem, the 23rd of Ter – 565 H.E.

In the afternoon, three days later the Keepers of the Gate gathered in their suite to discuss the questions they would ask by means of Lydia’s *Commune* spell. They had Huggert send them up a huge meal and a few flagons of mead and ale, and Roland brought three bottles of wine, as well. Mercy was there for input, but Gunthar had not been seen in days.

³⁹ See Sessions #64, 65 and 67.

⁴⁰ **DM’s Note:** In Aquerra, summoning spells can be cast to have a duration of 10 minutes per level if the creature summoned is given instructions that do not involve combat. If the summoned creature becomes involved in combat while undertaking its main task, it will disappear after one round regardless of how much of the duration is left.

What ensued was an argument and debate fueled by pride and spirits, that would last several hours, as every possible question and phrasing of the questions was suggested, revised, shot down or ridiculed.⁴¹

Kazrack argued stubbornly for questions so detailed the others were unsure what use the information gained would be, since the answers came in the form of 'yes' or 'no'. However, the dwarf was unsure that he could trust a human divinity to not to twist the answers to the questions.

Roland took offense to this, seeing it as an insult to Isis, who is a close ally of his own goddess.

The two of them barked in each other's face for an hour, ignoring or belittling the suggestions others made. Ratchis stormed out followed by Mercy and Dorn, while Martin muttered, as if to himself, trying to calm down the other two.

Mercy and Ratchis waited downstairs to let things cool down, while Dorn exhausted by a subject he did not really care so much about, left to find another tavern to have a drink in. He would meet the others back in the suite after the *Commune*. The two friars ordered some drinks.

Martin came down with Roland, and the Bastite order six rounds of dwarven spirits and brought them upstairs for him and Kazrack on a tray. The argument continued upstairs, while Ratchis, Martin and Mercy drafted a set of seven questions, leaving three slots for whatever Roland and Kazrack managed to come up with.

As Ra's Glory finished setting in the west, Ratchis, Roland, Kazrack, Martin and Mercy made their way over to Lydia's house.

They were greeted by Daphne at the door, and one by one introduced to a shriveled old woman with a few strands of woolen white hair left on her liver-spotted scalp. This was Lydia's mother. She spoke in a whisper no one in the party could hear, but all were too polite to say so. She led them into the sitting room, where Lydia knelt before the shrine. She wore a white gown with a broad gold collar. Her hair was in one thick braid wrapped around on the top of her head.

"Have you prepared the questions," she asked. "There will not be much time to think them over once the spell has begun."

"Yes," Martin said, speaking for the party. "I have written them down. Would you like to see them?"

"That will not be necessary," Lydia replied, still not turning around. "I will remember little or nothing of this experience. You will need to speak the questions to the celestial that will be contacting. You will see. Please sit."

The party took chairs that were lined up to face the shrine. Daphne and Lydia's mother sat near the back.

Plumes of incense smoke rose slowly from either side of the shrine and gathered in swirling clouds among the ceiling rafters. Lydia began a long chant to Isis, calling to the moon and the stars.

"Mother of all! Weaver of Magic! She who gathered the pieces of her husband-brother and sowed them, infusing all nature with her Power, I call to you, to use my body as vessel to send some aspect of your divine beauty, or some servant infused with your eternal power so that we might uncover the mysteries of this world so that it might be safer for all the mothers who reflect your Love with the love they have for their own children, so that the world will be safe for those children, just as every man and woman is your child."

⁴¹ **DM's Note:** This will probably go down as my least favorite session of 'Out of the Frying Pan' ever. The players argued over what questions to ask (both in and out of character) for nearly four hours of real time. My head was killing me by the time whatever compromise they came to was made, but unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) no notes or quotes were taken for the entire argument, so the details could not be recounted here.

On and on the chant went, but Lydia's voice grew softer and softer, as the sphere of opaque white glass on the shrine began to glow in the dim room. Finally, her words went from a raspy wheeze to total silence and Lydia's head lolled down, chin to chest, as if she had fallen asleep.

All was silent for a moment, and the Keepers of the Gate looked to each other in confusion. Finally, Lydia raised her head, but did not turn around.

"Whomever would ask the questions should speak now," a voice like an autumn breeze rustling through trees to send bright colorful leaves to tumble across the air emanated from the priestess. "This vessel grows tired already, and soon she will not be able to withstand it."

Martin the Green took a deep breath and looked to Kazrack who shrugged. Roland nodded that the mage should begin.

"Oh, great mother of us all, or servant of her highest love," Martin began. "Can the means to destroy the Book of Black Circles be found within the book itself?"

"No," came the voice issuing from Lydia.

Martin's shoulders sagged.

"Does the Book of Black Circles have to be destroyed in a specific place?"

"Yes," came the voice. Roland gulped as he noticed that Lydia's mouth did not move when the voice was heard. He felt a chill run down his back.

"Will we, the Keepers of the Gate, be able to locate Hurgun's Maze in time to enter it before anyone else does with the information gained in the Pit of Bones?" Martin asked.

There was a long pause.

"You will be able." There was a rush of air in the room, as the voice became deeper with the last syllable.

Kazrack sneered, but Martin hesitated, taken aback by answer that did not come in the form of 'yes' or 'no'.

"Hurry," Daphne whispered harshly.

"Are there any other parties currently seeking Hurgun's Maze by means of watching what we, the Keepers of the Gate, are doing?" Martin asked.

There was almost no pause. "Yes."

"Is our former companion, Beorth Sahkmet still alive?"

The wait for a reply seemed excruciatingly long.

"Yes."

The Keepers of the Gate of cheered spontaneously and smiled broadly.

"I knew it!" Ratchis said.

Martin cleared his throat.

"Will tossing the Book of Black Circles into the Positive Material Plane destroy it?"

“No.”

“Does Richard the Red seek out Hurgun’s Maze?”

“Yes.”

“Does the King of Gothanius carry fiendish blood in his veins?”

“No.”

“Does Adder’s splinter group of monks really serve Anubis?” Martin asked.

There was another long pause. “No.”

“Is there a connection between the goings on at the Garden of Stones and our quest for Hurgun’s Maze?”

“Not directly,” and with those two words, Lydia’s body slumped forward again, and this time she collapsed to the floor. Daphne leapt to her feet to help her mistress, and Ratchis helped the aid put the priestess in the seat he had been occupying a moment before. Lydia’s eyes fluttered and she jerked away startled at Ratchis’ closeness. The half-orc felt his face flush.

“I hope it was helpful,” Lydia said softly, closing her eyes again, and putting her hand to her head.

“It helped us to eliminate some possibilities,” Kazrack said, allowing some disappointment to creep into his voice; none of his questions had been used.

“It was very helpful. Thank you,” said Martin.

“Your sacrifice of this gift is appreciated,” Ratchis added.

“When we fulfill the alliances of our gods here in the mortal realms we do them great honor,” Roland said.

“Let us have some tea to clear our minds and relax,” Daphne said. “Wait here, I will prepare it and call you into the kitchen when it is ready.”

The rest of the evening passed with Ratchis, Martin, Kazrack, Roland and Mercy having tea with Lydia and Daphne (Lydia’s mother went to sleep). They did not speak of their mission, or the answers they had gotten, instead Kazrack told of his training, part of which involved the teaching of acolytes, and he went into detail about the intricate carvings that would be on the breastplate of his new armor. Mercy spoke a little of her time in Thracia working to ferry former slaves out of the western frontier of that land. Ratchis told the tale of his meeting Jetta and Narcel,⁴² and Roland told a funny tale about a drunken brawl his very first adventuring group got into the night before their very first adventure.

Feeling relaxed for the first time in months, the Keepers of the Gate wandered back to the inn. Kazrack wanted to have one last drink, and Ratchis wanted to find Dorn to have it with. Mercy returned home. Uncharacteristically, Roland excused himself as well, and headed back to the temple of Bast.

“It lightens my heart that Beorth still lives,” Kazrack said, as the trio climbed up their suite room to see if Dorn was there. “We will drink to his health and success when we go back downstairs. I will buy the house a round in his honor!”

Ratchis opened the door, hearing Dorn’s voice within. “Dorn! Come join us for a…”

⁴² Jetta and Narcel are Mercy’s parents and Ratchis’ teachers.

Sitting at the table in the suite's parlor was a tall thin figure with shockingly white skin, black hair, and a black mole on his left cheek. He had hawk-like features and wore black travel-stained clothing. It was Rindalith.

End of Session #72

AQUERRA

Session #73 ⁴³

"I knew we had a bottle of wine back there," Dorn said, as he came out of the bedroom pulling at a wine bottle's cork. "Oh! Hi, Ratchis!"

A thin gray smoke filled the room, and Ratchis noticed a couple of pipes on the table where the warlock sat.

"I have no quarrel with you," Rindalith said, slowly getting to his feet and putting up both long-fingered hands. Long white hairs curled away wildly from the middle-aged man's thick black locks.

"He is delaying us in order to use foul magic!" Kazrack said, pushing past Ratchis into the room as soon as he noted what was going on. Martin the Green threw his back to the corridor wall just outside the door, remembering the forking lightning bolt of their last encounter.⁴⁴

"But I have come to you in friendship, Kazrack," Rindalith said, soothingly. He waved the fingers of his left hand once. The dwarf pulled short of the tackle he originally intended.

"Uh, very well, you came unexpectedly; my apologies," Kazrack said, looking back to Ratchis with confusion on his face.

"Hey, what's going on? Your friend has been entertaining me," Dorn said, a dumb-founded look lodged on his face. He still held the bottle of wine.

"He has mind-controlled Kazrack and perhaps Dorn," Ratchis warned Martin. The half-orc yanked the dagger he kept on his black bracers with the momentum of his charge at the pale warlock. "Let's see if your charm spells work on me!"

"Is that how this is going to be? Fine," Rindalith said, sounding bored. He stepped back as Ratchis' blade cut at his forearm, but the Friar of Nephthys never got to follow up the blow, as out from behind Dorn leapt a dog of utter darkness. It was a mastiff made of shadow itself and it leapt at Ratchis, ripping at his arm and hip.

"Stand down, friends!" Kazrack said, raising his hands. "If Rindalith meant us harm he would have done so by now. Now, let me cast a spell to protect us from the dog-shade." And with that he cast protection from evil on himself. Serendipitously, the spell also blocked magics that controlled from without, so the dwarf was clear-headed once again.

"*Langsam!*" chanted Rindalith, and Kazrack and Ratchis felt their limbs cramp up slowing down their movement incredibly.

The shadow mastiff ripped at Ratchis' arm, keeping him from stopping Rindalith.

"Dorn! Don't choose between me and Rindalith! Get this damn dog off me!" Ratchis barked, and Dorn drew his sword, as if awakening from a dream, and cut at the shadow beast.

The dog, bewildered, let go of Ratchis, and the half-orc did not hesitate. Hearing the words of a spell on the warlock's lips again, Ratchis grabbed Rindalith, pinning the lanky man's arms to his side and squeezed with all his might. The words of the spell died on the man's lips and he grunted in pain, as Kazrack came around and slammed his hairy knuckles into the warlock's face several times as Ratchis held him.

Rindalith managed to gain purchase against the chair he had been sitting on and kicked back, sending Ratchis into a spin. Kazrack had to hold his punch to keep from hitting his companion, but the half-orc did not let go. He squeezed more and smiled as he heard Rindalith's frantic chanting interrupted by agony again and again.

⁴³ This session was played on Saturday, January 24, 2004.

⁴⁴ Way back in Session #29.

“Turn him around!” Kazrack cried, as Ratchis and Rindalith continued to struggle. The dwarf pulled off the weighted sack about his halberd blade and turned to help Dorn, who was barely keeping the shadow mastiff at bay. Martin stepped into the room with authority, mentally moving his arcane shield before him, and cried, “*Lentus!*”

The dog’s silent barking slowed, but Rindalith seemed to wriggle with no less vigor in Ratchis’ arms.

“*Bilden sich v’ einem affen!*” Rindalith cried with his last breath, and the sputtering choke turned into a cry of victory, as his chest began to expand and fill with air. Ratchis buckled down trying to keep his arms tightly secure, but both of Rindalith’s arms began to lengthen and thicken, and his cloak and clothes shriveled and then bloomed with black and brown hair. Rindalith’s shoulders exploded outward, and the half-orc roared in pain as he was forced to let go; a nearly seven-foot ape stood where Rindalith had just been.

Crying out in surprise, Kazrack spun around and slammed the head of his halberd in the ape’s chest, drawing blood. The ape knocked the pole arm back and slapped Ratchis with the back of a hairy hand with disdain that was evident through the warlock’s now simian features.

Martin the Green reached into his *bag of tricks* and tossed a furry ball at the shadowy dog. The thing expanded into a raging wolverine that began to savage it. Dorn felt the satisfaction of his blade seeming to actually pierce the thing while it was distracted. The dog was able to reach past its new foe and grab Dorn’s thigh in its jaws and pull. The sandy-haired warrior was pulled off his feet.

Not waiting to draw his weapon, Ratchis slammed Rindalith with a fist, but the new form was resilient. Two slamming blows with his great hairy arms, and Ratchis was on the floor stunned and struggling to get back up. Rindalith grunted with satisfaction, and then howled, feeling the bite of Kazrack’s halberd in his side. He leapt away, but more blood was pouring down his leg.

Ratchis stood, but Rindalith was already bounding out the door into the hall beyond his reach.

Kazrack thrust his halberd into the mastiff, and for the first time noticed it mimed a yelp. It retreated into Martin’s path and nipped at the wizard as he tried to take off after Rindalith. It turned back around and looked at Kazrack, Dorn and now Ratchis beginning to encircle it, as the wolverine leapt back into the fray. It let out a long howl.

Kazrack dropped his halberd and turning fled into the bedrooms slamming the door shut in abject panic, passed only by Dorn who threw himself beneath his bed to shiver in the corner. The wolverine, unnerved by the howl as well, took off to follow its master out into the hall.

Ratchis managed to get the peace-knot off his great sword and unsling it. Unaffected by the fear, he chopped the dog three times and it dissipated into nothingness.

He went into the bedroom with slowed strides to see to Kazrack and Dorn.

Thomas leapt from Martin’s shoulder up onto a rafter above the stairs, as his master hustled to keep up with the amazingly fast, yet still loping, gait of Rindalith in ape form.

There were screams from the common room as the ape smashed through past the barmaids and the regulars and out the door.

“Out of the way! Out of the way! Wild ape!” Martin cried, as he chased after.

He could hear an echo of the cries as the wolverine came running along behind and finally caught up.

The narrow streets of Nikar were abandoned, leaving only the light of the rising moon to lick up and down alleys. The ape loped through the shadows weaving in and out as it headed for the tier edge. His heart pounding in his chest and his breath hot in his throat, Martin continued to give chase, commanding the wolverine to go ahead and try to catch the warlock-ape, if it could.

The ape's silhouette moved out into the open area free of buildings that marked the edge of the plateau, now making a beeline for the low wall.

"Natan-Ahb's Beard!" Martin heard a dwarven town guard cry out as the ape rushed past him. Martin and his wolverine rushed by right after. "Halt!"

"It's a warlock! I mean, a witch! Wild ape! Wild ape!" Martin cried, not sure which would make the guard more likely to help him.

"I said, halt!" the dwarf cried again. He pulled his crossbow from his back and began to load a quarrel into it.

"You can't let him get away!" Martin cried, still running. The wolverine leapt at the ape, but Rindalith turned around and slammed it away. The vicious little thing disappeared as it fell to the earth again.

The ape's form began to melt back into the tall gaunt man. Martin stopped about sixty feet from him and readied a spell.

"You will regret you chose to fight and not talk," Rindalith hissed.

"Get down on your knees and put your hands on your heads!" the dwarf commanded.

"We could be discussing this in a civilized fashion, but instead I am certain you will spend the evening extricating yourself from a mess," Rindalith added, his skin began to turn brown, as his arms began to extend and fill in the space below, connecting to the trunk of his body. As he spoke, his mouth began to twist and protrude with fangs. "I leave you to your fate." And with that he turned and flung himself over the low wall, and a moment later a huge brown bat glided back up into view and then away into the darkness.

"I need to speak to Councilor Lydia immediately!" Martin said, spinning around to face the dwarven guard.

The guard's jaw was resting on his chest, but he gathered his wits and spoke through gritted teeth. "Get down on your knees and put your hands on your head. Right now!"

Martin sighed and complied.

"I need to speak to Councilor Lydia right away," Martin said again.

"Shut your yap, and if I see your nose so much as twitch, I am going put this here bolt right in your eye," the dwarven guard said, as he kept it pointed with one hand and reached for a horn resting on his mailed chest. He gave it three low short hoots.

"Martin!" Ratchis came out into the open around the corner of a building. He had sheathed his great sword and returned his dagger to the sheath on his left bracer.

The dwarven guard spun around startled, and then spun back to cover Martin again, and then back.

"This is a misunderstanding," Ratchis said, stepping forward slowly.

"Take another step pig-fucker. I dare you!" There was another barking dwarven voice as two more guards came charging into the open, crossbows in hand.

Ratchis raised his hands and snarled. Three more guards arrived momentarily, though these were human and deferred to the first ones.

"I'm telling you; Lydia needs to be informed of this," Martin pleaded.

"I am sure Captain Lodestone will let her and the other council members know if they need to," the dwarven lieutenant replied.

They were relieved of their weapons and components and led towards the stairs down to the guardhouse on the central tier.

"What took you so long?" Martin asked.

"Kazrack is still charmed," Ratchis replied.⁴⁵ "I was able to break the spell on Dorn, but Kazrack..."

"Quiet!" One of the dwarves barked.

"And I was slowed," Ratchis whispered.

Martin and Ratchis were made to sit in an open holding cell for the Captain to arrive. It was ten minutes later that Kazrack and Dorn were led in as well.

Dorn wore a long face. "I'm sorry, Ratchis," he said meekly.

"There is nothing you could have done," Ratchis replied.

"But he charmed me so easily. Doesn't that mean my will is weak?" Dorn asked.

"No. It only shows how insidious such magic can be."

"What are you talking about?" Kazrack frowned.

"You are charmed by Rindalith," Ratchis replied.

"No, I am not."

"Yes, you are," Ratchis said. "Don't you remember when it temporarily was not working?"

"Uh, all I know is that Rindalith came to us peacefully and suddenly you attacked him and shadow dog-thing attacked us, and sure I helped, but only to break up the fight. You are a dear friend D'nar. I would choose you over him, but the point is, it needn't have been that way if you had accepted his overture of friendship." Kazrack explained.

"You are charmed," Ratchis repeated, and Martin nodded.

"It happened to me," said Dorn, not looking up.

"Nonsense! Dwarves cannot be charmed," Kazrack insisted.

"Shut up in there!" came a cry from the guards.

Captain Marno Lodestone arrived with a grimace etched onto his face, his eyes burning with a dull fire as if he had felt the pain of it.

"Your kind never learn," he said, looking at Ratchis and then to others and then letting his eyes rest on the half-orc again, and then pointed to Kazrack. "Master Delver, we will start with you."

⁴⁵ **DM's Note:** While protection from evil protected him from control during its duration, when the spell ran out Rindalith's spell was still in effect.

"I can certainly clear this whole mess up," Kazrack said, standing. "You see it was really a misunderstanding with an old friend."

"He is charmed," Ratchis said, standing. "All he says is tainted by that foul magic."

"Don't be silly, Ratchis," Kazrack said. "Captain, I assure you I am not charmed. Dwarves are too stout for magic to affect us easily, as you well know."

The Captain nodded and then looked at the half-orc. "Sit back down!"

"No!" Ratchis leapt forward to pull Kazrack back and felt the fists of two dwarven guards on him immediately.

"Ratchis, stop!" Martin and Kazrack were both crying out.

The half-orc quelled his temper, but it was too late. Heavy dwarven fists, landed on him again and soon he was being manacled and dragged off to spend the night "in the hole," a small solitary cell deep in the earth.

"Captain, Ratchis was telling the truth, Kazrack is under the influence of a spell," Martin said.

"He has to be to waste his time with the lot of you," the Captain replied.

In the Captain's office, Kazrack took a seat.

"The people you choose to spend time with says a lot about you," the Captain said.

"My companions are steadfast, and circumstances have conspired against us to bring us into conflict with the law, but not by our own doing," Kazrack said. "This has been a misunderstanding."

"So, you are saying you and your companions were not running through the streets of my town with weapons and fighting some shape-changer of some kind?"

"Well, we were surprised in our room by the mentor of a former companion," Kazrack said. "We have not always seen eye to eye, and unfortunately Ratchis misconstrued something and there were strong words, and perhaps some blows exchanged, but nothing serious."

"The testimony of one of the guards does not seem to match up with that version of the story, at least not exactly," the Captain said. "Are you sure this is not about some past grudge that you and your companions decided to try to resolve with the confines of Nikar despite my warning against such things?"

"No, sir," replied Kazrack. "Like I said, this was all a misunderstanding, and Rindalith was not there to hurt us, nor did we want to hurt him, but..."

"Yes?"

"I don't know. I'm a little bit confused about what happened, exactly," Kazrack stuttered.

Captain Lodestone harrumphed and sent Kazrack back to the cell and called for Martin the Green.

"Have you called for Councilor Lydia?" Martin asked as he came in.

"I will ask the questions here," the captain said. "And the enforcement of the law is my domain, if it is a matter for the rest of the Council is something for me to decide."

“There is an evil warlock loose in your town, and as a member of the Ruling Council and a priestess of Isis, she should be informed as soon as possible,” Martin added.

“Rest assured, she and the rest of the Council will know about this soon enough,” Lodestone said. “So, you freely contradict the testimony of your companion Kazrack?”

“He is still under the charm of the warlock, as Ratchis tried to tell you,” Martin explained. “Anything he said will be skewed to make it look as if Rindalith is a friend of his.”

“Why did this... what was his name? Rindalith? Why did he attack you?” the captain asked.

“He is still looking for a former companion of ours, a young woman looking to leave her life of witchcraft behind. She fell in our journeys,” Martin explained, realizing he had to shade the truth to make himself and the others look as good as possible. “He would not accept that she was not around.”

Captain Lodestone looked at Martin for a long time. “Why didn’t you call for the guard immediately?”

“We didn’t have time,” Martin replied. “And by the time I was outside chasing after him, I was afraid that if I made too much noise innocent townsfolk would be awakened to investigate, and they might be endangered.”

“Do you have any idea where this warlock is now?”

“No, but what he said just before he turned into bat-form led me to believe that he is not coming back,” Martin said.

“Didn’t you just describe him as ‘on the loose’?” Captain Lodestone asked. “And how you needed to see Councilor Lydia because of that?”

“Well, just in case...”

“For your sake, I hope that he really is gone, because I will not to be lenient the next time I find you in violation of the law, no matter what the excuse.”

“So, we can go?”

“You and your companions will be fined for disturbing the peace and the half-breed will have to spend the night in the hole so he can learn respect,” the Captain said.

Martin the Green nodded.

“Make sure you pay your fines on time, the citations will be sent to the inn,” Captain Lodestone added.

“Shouldn’t there be a hearing to see if we are guilty and what the fine, if any, should be?” Martin asked.

“Consider yourselves having pled guilty,” the Captain made a notation in his ledger. “Unless of course, you and your companions all want to remain in cells until the time of the hearing and throughout its duration, it shouldn’t last more than a few days...”

“We will pay.”⁴⁶

As Martin, Dorn and Kazrack walked back to the inn, Kazrack continued to insist that dwarves could not be charmed.

⁴⁶ The Keepers of the Gate had to pay thirty-five pieces of silver each, plus promise to pay for any damages to the inn and its property.

“If that were not the case, would you admit that you were wrong?” Martin asked.

“Of course,” Kazrack replied, sounding offended.

“Then ask the High Priest when you get an opportunity and report his response,” Martin said.

“If I get the opportunity, but really, it is waste of time,” Kazrack said.

“Whatever you say, Kazrack,” Martin patronized. “Dorn, what were you and Rindalith talking about when we arrived?”

Dorn has not spoken a word since they had left the guardhouse.

“Everything,” Dorn was silent for a long time, and then continued, his voice hushed and full of shame. “I told him almost everything I knew or could piece together from what I have overheard. It seemed to make sense at the time. He said he was your friend and he seemed very friendly.”

“That is where the skill of evil lies,” Kazrack said. “It seems pleasing, but it is not.”

“Well, you know what that means?” Martin sighed. “It means, we’ll probably have to deal with Rindalith at Hurgun’s Maze as well. I mean, if he has found out about it, he is going to want to get its power, as well; everyone else seems to.”

“Then we’ll kill him, too,” Kazrack shrugged. “Or die trying.”

The dwarf returned to the temple, while Martin and Dorn returned to the inn, where the watch-mage had to pay off Huggert to calm him down and in order to keep their rooms.

Ratchis was not released until very late the next day, with a stern warning from Captain Lodestone.

“Next time we have to bring you in, you’ll be lucky to get off with just being exiled from Nikar,” the dwarf said. “Understand?”

Ratchis grunted and went to sleep in Mercy’s house.

But things were quiet for a long time, and the Keepers of the Gate fell into a daily rhythm. Ratchis continued his training with Mercy, taking a break in the evening to go over his reading with Martin, while taking some time to teach the watch-mage orcish. Dorn, who often complained of being bored, spent his days sleeping late and playing King’s Men with some of the inn’s regulars. Every couple of days he’d visit Ratchis and do some sparring to keep their skills sharp and had prayer and religious study with the two friars.

In addition to his lessons with Ratchis, Martin trained daily with Visalyia. With the gnome’s help, he identified the magical items the party had collected on their journey from Gothanius.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ **DM’s Note:** The small clay jugs held half a dozen draughts of Blood of Ashronk (potions of Aid enchanted by a priest of the orc god), while the rug was a Prayer Rug of the Wayfarer. Rolling objects up in the rug creates a pocket dimensional space that can allow it to hold objects of much greater weight and volume that would be normal. Regardless of how much more than 25 pounds is rolled into the rug it still always weighs 25 pounds, up to a weight of 500 lbs. Also, the objects placed inside cannot individually be of larger size than the rug. Whenever the rug is opened all the objects come spilling out. You cannot take out one item at a time.

Kazrack continued his daily work on his full plate mail, and his training to access more powerful spells from his gods. He embarrassedly admitted to Martin and Ratchis that dwarves could get charmed, albeit very rarely, after he asked another of the rune-throwers about it.

Gunthar came and went as he pleased, showing up at the Inn of Friendly Flame every few nights, Nasilla in tow, to get very drunk and berate his companions.

It was Roland that was seen the least. He seemed to become withdrawn and moody, and it would not be until two days before the Keepers of the Gate were leave to Nikar that they would realize that he had left town without a word two days before.

End of Session #73

AQUERRA

Session #74

Isilem, the 9th of Quark – 565 H.E.

“Roland might be unreliable, but he is still trustworthy, if you understand the difference I am getting at,” Mercy said.

Kazrack, Ratchis, and Martin were having an early dinner with their cohort, Dorn and Ratchis’ fellow friar, Mercy, in a dim corner of the Inn of Friendly Flame. The day before, Kazrack had finally finished his masterwork full plate mail armor and his priestly training, and he paid for a round in celebration.

Outside, the middle of summer blazed on and there seemed to be few places in Nikar’s exposed plateaus where the withering sun could be avoided. Martin and Ratchis’ training had finished a day or two earlier, and preparations had started for the long overland journey back to Gothanium. However, when they sent word to Roland to inform him, there was no reply. Martin the Green visited the Temple of Bast and was told that the priest had left town a day or so earlier, saying he had to take care of business.

“But he could be charmed,” Ratchis said. “We told him everything. He has information that if used against us could be deadly.”

“There is nothing we can do about it now,” Kazrack said. “The question is, do we wait for him to return?”

“We have no idea where he is or what he is doing, or even if he will be back,” Ratchis replied. “We leave as scheduled.”⁴⁸

The others agreed.

“I can always send him after you if he returns after you’ve left,” Mercy offered.

“I am going to scout the ways out of town and see if I can pick up his trail,” Ratchis said. “Just to see if I can figure out where he might have been headed.”

“I sent word by faultless to Alexandra the Lavender not too long after we arrived in Nikar,” Martin said.⁴⁹ “I was hoping to hear from her by now. In fact, I hoped she might even come herself so we might discuss the situation and get her advice.”

“We have to plan as if we were on our own,” Ratchis said. “Because we are...”

“Well, I will send another message, this one to Daniel, the castle-steward, to let him know we are returning, and about our run-in with Rindalith.”⁵⁰

“Maybe you shouldn’t mention our return,” Ratchis suggested.

“I am just afraid our absence has been noted and we might be in violation of our contracts,” Martin said.

“I can live with that,” Ratchis replied.

Kazrack shrugged his shoulders.

“After we are done here, let’s go take care of whatever last-minute purchases and preparations we have to make and then meet back here to discuss what kinds of spells we are going to prepare while on the road,” Ratchis suggested.

⁴⁸ **DM’s Note:** Roland’s player (Jon S.) was MIA for a few weeks, and it was unsure if he was going to stick with game, so we moved on.

⁴⁹ Faultless are message-bearing birds known for their unerring arrival. They are very expensive.

⁵⁰ In Session #29, Daniel asked the party to retrieve the queen’s diary from Rindalith.

Kazrack nodded and poured most of a mug of mead down his throat, the rest was soaked into his beard, now sporting more rune-covered ceramic and stone beads woven into it.

“Well, I plan to prepare the *detect scrying* spell daily,” Martin said. “I have enough components to do it every day for nearly two months. I figured that as we get closer to the time for the entrance to the Maze to be revealed, we can afford even less to be spied upon by Richard or anyone else.”

Ratchis went to the bar and another flagon of ale for the table. The common room was empty except for two old-timers at the far end of the bar nursing their ales, and a young man leaning in and speaking with Huggert over the bar. He threw Ratchis a suspicious glance as the half-orc approached.

“Why are you looking for him? You don’t have some kind of grudge against him and his folks, do ya?” the inn-keep was asking.

“No,” the young man slid a small stack of silver coins across the bar. “I was sent by a member of his order to help him.”

“Okay, because we don’t want people taking care of their dirty laundry around here, if you get my meaning,” Huggert did not sound convinced, but he took the silver. “Maybe, you tell me what you want, and I’ll pass the message to him. Tell me where I can tell him to find you.”

“I guess I’ll be staying here,” the young man looked around, as if the place did not hold to his standards in some way. “If the watch-mage is here, I guess I will run into him eventually.”

Ratchis ordered the drinks and looked over at the young man once again. Huggert looked back and forth and then pointed to the half-orc.

“You should speak to this man,” Huggert said, and then turned to Ratchis. “If this is trouble, you’d better take it out of town.”

“You know Martin the Green?” the young man asked. He could not keep a look of disgust from washing over his face as he took in Ratchis.

“Who’s asking?” Ratchis grunted.

The young man frowned. His hands went to his belt where a long sword was hung low and peace-knotted and long nasty-looking dagger was tucked into it as well.

“I am Logan Naismith,” the young man said, not offering a hand. “I was sent by Alexandra the Lavender, a member of his order.”

Logan had the olive skin, square jaw, and lean stature of a Herman-Lander. He was a few inches shorter than six feet tall and had close cropped black curls on his head. The few mousy whiskers on his chin showed his youth, but Ratchis saw something in his brown eyes that seemed wizened by experience. Logan wore travel-stained black studded leather armor and had dropped his pack by the door.

“You have a letter?” Ratchis asked.

Logan hesitated. “No... But I have things she told me that she said only he and she would know,” he finally said.

Ratchis sized up the young man for another half-minute and then gestured with his chin for him to follow. Halfway back to the table, the half-orc stopped and looked down at Logan.

“I’m called Ratchis, by the way, and if this is a trick, I promise you will regret it.”

Logan Naismith smirked but nodded.

Logan joined them and while he begged off at first when offered some food, he ate hungrily after he finally accepted. He spoke with them while dunking thick slabs of bread in tomato soup; a wedge of cheese half-melted in it.

“I have come to Derome-Delem from Teamsburg,” Logan said.

“Teamsburg? That’s Neergaard?” Martin asked.

“No, Herman Land,” Logan lowered his head and slurped soup from the bowl.

“Oh, *that* Teamsburg,” Martin said, his voice filling with pity.⁵¹

“So, you just happened to have come to Derome-Delem all the way from Herman Land? Or were drawn here by the promises of the King of Gothanius like everyone else?” Ratchis asked, oblivious to the significance.

“I came here to visit a friend of my father,” Logan replied. “Alexandra the Lavender.”

“Who is your father?” Martin asked.

“Allistair the Coal, watch-mage of Teamsburg,” Logan said.

“Are you a mage?” Martin’s brow furrowed.

“No, my brother is an alumnus,” Logan said. “The Academy was not for me.”

The barmaids had started their shift, and one of them brought round another tray full of mugs and pitchers of mead, greeting Kazrack with blushing faces.

Logan made a face of displeasure when he saw the hairy-chinned broad young women.

“My father sent me to Alexandra to give her whatever help she needed, and in turn she sent me to seek you out and help you with whatever you are doing,” Logan said. “She said you had sent her a message explaining your difficulties.”

“That is putting it lightly,” Martin replied, with skepticism “Did she send anything else?”

“We should not discuss them in public,” Logan said, looking around and then taking a long sip of ale.

“Aye, let us grab a bottle and return to my home,” Mercy said, standing. “I have some questions of my own.”

At Mercy’s house, she cast *detect evil* to scan Logan’s aura, with the young man’s consent, and Ratchis followed it up with a *detect charm* spell. Both came up negative, though Mercy noticed the faintest lingering hint of evil on Martin the Green.

“So, what did Alexandra tell you?” Martin asked, after he received a ring from Logan; a ring that was certainly Alexandra’s.

⁵¹ The City of Teamsburg, an important northeastern port in the Kingdom of Herman Land, was the site of the first strike sneak attack on the part of the Black Islands Barony that incited the current civil war. More than half the city burned, and thousands died.

“Mostly that I should come help you however I could, and she told me about this rogue watch-mage named Richard the Red,” Logan began. “There have been agents of the Academy looking for him for a while, though they thought he was in Thricia.”

“We are very familiar with him,” Kazrack said.

Logan shrugged. “According to Alexandra, there is talk of his arranging for his own son to be kidnapped by someone or other, and later when the son wasn’t cooperative, he conspired to have the boy’s betrothed kidnapped as well.”

“Any other Academy news?” Martin asked.

“They chose a new Archmage, Aemil, formerly the Aquamarine,” Logan added.⁵²

“Okay, so what else did she say? Did she send any information about the Maze?” Martin asked.

“The what?” Logan was puzzled.

“Hurgun’s Maze.”

“Uh, I think I might have heard of it before,” Logan scratched his head, and shrugging. “My father probably mentioned it some time when he was going on and on showing off all the lore he knows.”

“She didn’t tell you anything about the Maze? You don’t bring information about it?”

Logan shook his head.

“What about the drow witches?”

“Drow are a myth,” Logan replied.

Kazrack slapped his own forehead in frustration.

“Hopefully, you will be able to go along believing that,” Martin replied.

Logan frowned and looked at each of the Keepers of the Gate in turn, puzzled.

“What else did she tell you to tell me?” Martin asked.

“Well, it seems that there is a rumor coming out of Gothanius about a rogue watch-mage and his party of non-humans. And how he has been neglecting his duties for his own agenda in Gothanius.”

“Yes, Richard the Red,” Kazrack said.

“No, Martin the Green,” Logan pointed at the watch-mage, and then at Ratchis and finally at the dwarf.

Martin’s shoulders sagged.

After a long moment of silence, Martin stood. “I guess I best go send that message to Daniel right away in hopes of salvaging my reputation even a little bit.”

“Write it down and keep talking with Logan. I will take it for you,” Mercy offered. Martin agreed.

⁵² Upon accepting the position of Archmage of the Academy, the watch-mage drops the color associated with his name.

“Anyway, they know me in this town, I’ll get a fair price,” Mercy added with a wink as she left with the letter a few minutes later.

“I don’t know what else there is to tell you, except that Alexandra was able to dig up some old letters from the former watch-mage of Bountiful that seemed to suggest the first king of Gothanitus made some kind of pact with demons for power,” Logan said, and shrugged his shoulders, as if he did not quite believe it.

“We had suspected such a thing,” Martin commented.

“The only other Gothanitus news she gave me was how the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium’s relations with Gothanitus are strained. The work on the road is still going on, but at a slowed rate because of some disagreement about some community of gnomes in an area the humans want to expand into.”

“Is pressure from the Consortium going to keep Gothanitus from doing so?” Martin asked.

“I have no idea,” Logan said. “She said she might send more information later; I can only assume by magical means.”

“What about news of the world beyond Derome-Delem?” Martin asked.

“The war is going rotten,” Logan said. “There are fewer battles. The Herman Land navy cannot get through with enough force to capture the islands, but the few troops that have gotten through have managed to burn so many fields, before they’ve been slaughtered, they say the common people and most of the lesser nobility are near starving.”

“That sounds like Herman Land is in the stronger position,” Kazrack said.

“Maybe, but they have almost no navy left, and pirates pick around the western islands in numbers rivaling the legends of the old days of the Pirate Kings,” Logan said.

There was an abrupt knock on the door. Gunthar’s voice came echoing from outside.

“Hey, jackasses! Get out here! I have something to show you!”

Outside they found the Neergaardian holding the reins of wooly beast of burden with a long neck and a pronounced snout. It was brown and white, and its big lips chewed incessantly.

“Maaaaa!” the beast bleated.

“It’s a llama!” Gunthar said.⁵³

“I know it’s a llama,” Ratchis said. “Do you know how to take care of this thing?”

“How hard can it be?” Gunthar replied. “I figured we needed it to carry heavy stuff.”

“Okay,” Ratchis replied.

“I’m glad I have your permission, oh pious priest of freedom,” Gunthar said, snidely.

Ratchis growled.

“They had some of these beasts in Garvan,” Martin said. “In Thricia we use yaks.”

⁵³ Llamas are commonly used as beasts of burden and even to ride by the people who live in the hilly and mountainous areas of Derome-Delem. Hill dwarf communities of this island also commonly use them. The broader alpaca breed of llama is also found all over El Reino Unido de Familias Superiores.

“You going back to Gothanius?” Logan asked.

“Oh! I know you just arrived, but yes, we are leaving tomorrow,” Martin replied to Logan, but looked at Ratchis.

“We’re not delaying,” Ratchis said. “And we haven’t decided if he is coming with us. It’s dangerous.”

“I’m sure Alexandra would not have sent him to aid us if he were unable to take care of himself,” Martin reasoned.

“Who in the hells is this yahoo?” Gunthar said, looking at Logan up and down.

“I do not know that he is a ‘yahoo’,” Kazrack replied.

“I am Logan,” the young man said, frowning. “I have been sent to aid Martin.”

“You coming along with us, too?” Gunthar asked.

“That has not been determined for sure yet,” Ratchis interjected.

“Damn, you guys’ll let any old poofter into the party these days,” Gunthar shook his head. “You gonna tell him all our secrets before he sneaks off, like ya did the last one?”

“What is he talking about?” Logan’s sneered; his body visibly tensed up.

“Gunthar here has never learned manners,” Martin explained.

“Though maybe one day someone will teach him the hard way,” Kazrack added. “I would have done it, but the law here in town forbids fisticuffs.”

“You still wanna have a go, Stumpy?” Gunthar asked. “I can squeeze you in for tomorrow afternoon, after a short appointment with shrumpy here’s momma.” He pointed at Logan and winked.

“Gunthar!” Ratchis roared.

“Perhaps I will take you up on that,” Kazrack said through gritted teeth. He rubbed his tightened fist with his other hand.

“If you ever speak about my mother again there is going to be a problem,” Logan said, flatly.

“What? You gonna cry now, baby? Need your nappy changed?” Gunthar laughed.

“Yes, that is exactly what we need, to be fighting among ourselves out in the wilderness,” Martin said. He turned to Gunthar. “You are going to have to learn how to treat people or else we are going to have to ask you to leave the group.”

“Oh! Marty’s grown a pair all of a sudden,” Gunthar continued to laugh, holding his stomach in an exaggerated fashion. He looked at Logan as he spoke “I guess I should pick on someone my own size, right Shorty?” Gunthar winked again.

Logan’s eyes shot daggers at Gunthar as the Neergaardian, pulled the llama around.

“I’ll meet you tossers back here before dawn, so you can latch whatever gear to Fearless here afore we go,” Gunthar said, leading the llama off.

“Fearless?” Martin queried.

“Ya chose a stupid name for yourselves. I figured I’d keep the old one alive, at least until we are forced to eat him,” Gunthar exploded with laughter, and was soon gone.

“Why do you travel with him?” Logan asked, finally speaking again.

“I don’t know,” said Kazrack.

“He is good in a fight,” Ratchis said. “And he is a burden placed upon me by Nephthys.”

“Do you really think so?” Kazrack asked.

Ratchis shrugged.

There was a long silence.

“Was that a joke?” Dorn asked.

“Yes,” Ratchis replied sheepishly.

“Dwarven humor is better,” Kazrack said. “Here, listen to this one...”

Everyone groaned and went back inside.

After a supper prepared by Mercy in honor of their coming trip, Dorn took Logan to the inn for a few drinks and so he could see a little more of the town before having to leave the next day. In reality, it was an excuse for the rest of the party to discuss the new perspective companion without his presence.

“Are you sure this is not a trick, or that he is not a spy of some kind,” Kazrack asked Martin. “Could not Richard the Red have provided him with information?”

“He had a ring from Alexandra the Lavender with her *arcane mark* upon it,” Martin replied.

“And that cannot be forged?” Ratchis asked.

“Not unless someone wants to incur the Curse of Thoth,” Martin said.⁵⁴

Kazrack seemed unconvinced.

“Well, if he is a spy, then let him come with us so we can keep an eye on him,” Ratchis said. “But if he is not, I am concerned that the road we travel and what we go do is too dangerous for him. He does look young.”

“He must be older than either Derek or Jeremy were,” Kazrack said.

“Yes, and they are both dead,” Ratchis replied.

“What do propose we do?” Martin asked, frowning.

“He and I can spar a little when we get out of town and we can get a gauge of his abilities,” Ratchis suggested.

“If you feel it must be done,” Martin sighed. “Let us just make sure we do it when we are not too far from town so if we do need to send him back, he will not have too far to travel on his own.”

⁵⁴ Wizard’s arcane marks are protected by the power of Thoth, God of Knowledge and Magic. Those who forge one are said to become feeble-minded.

“And D’nar, if he beats you, do we get to send you back to town?” Kazrack shoved the half-orc with his elbow, but Ratchis just growled.

They spent another hour going over lists of provisions and pouring over Martin’s growing collection of maps. It was decided they would take the western route out of town to avoid the Black Orc lands, though what little information they could glean of the foothills northwest of Nikar suggested the presence of giants.

“We’ll be saving a day or three by that route, but when I think of passing through mountains with rock-throwing giants...” Ratchis began.

“I know, exhilarating, isn’t it?” Kazrack’s eyes gleamed.

“Not exactly what I was thinking,” Ratchis replied.

“I have gained a spell that will be useful for avoiding such encounter,” Martin said. “An arcane eye I can send way ahead of us, or up to a high point to get a good view of which routes are safest.”

Soon afterwards, Kazrack left to return to the temple and say his good-byes to the friends and peers he had met there. He spent his final night on dwarven consecrated ground to pray to Hodonar for a safe trip. Martin returned to the inn, where Dorn was drinking in the common room, and Logan was already asleep, exhausted from his own journey. The watch-mage slipped on Lacan’s Demise and, after studying his spellbooks for another hour, went to bed.

Back at Mercy’s house, Ratchis went over his pack one last time, making sure it was packed for ease of long travel, and that what he might need often was easily accessible. As he was about to climb into the loft to bed, Mercy called to him from her own bed.

“Ratchis?”

“Yes?”

“I think we should spend the night together,” Mercy said.

“We do that every night,” Ratchis replied, puzzled.

“No, I mean... Come here,” Mercy said, and she blew out the candle by her bed. “There is no reason why friends should not share a close moment together before one is about to leave to what might be his death.”

Ratchis went to her.

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“Don’t you think that’s enough, D’nar?” Kazrack asked, suppressing a smile.

Gunthar, on the other hand, was bent over double, guffawing, and holding his sides.

Ratchis stood, dragon-hilted great sword in both his hands, in a tense combat ready pose. A huge welt was being to swell up on the side of his face near his left eye, and a light trickle of blood poured down his forearm from a wrist cut. Sweat streamed down his face, zig-zagging over the bumps and craters of his orcish features.

Logan stood five or six feet away, long sword held loosely in his hand before him and swaying back and forth slowly as if keeping time, his off-hand moving and back and forth from the hilt to stretched out to the right for balance. His eyes were narrow slits, and his legs were slightly bent, as he bounced a bit, ready for the half-orc to try and strike again.

Ratchis lowered his sword.

“He can handle himself,” the half-orc said with a sigh.

“Aw! I wanted to see Snuffles bleeding on the ground!” Gunthar grinned. He turned to Logan. “You did good, kid!”

“Why was this really necessary?” Logan asked.

“Because we go to face demons and other foul and powerful creatures, and we could not in good conscience allow you along without knowing if you could handle yourself in a fight,” Kazrack said.

“Can demons be killed?” Logan asked.

Kazrack nodded.

“Then there’s no problem,” Logan said, smirking. “I know how to kill things.”

Just after dawn the Keepers of the Gate had left Nikar by the western road and had turned northward with the town less than a half-mile behind them. They marched along narrow paths that wound between farmsteads; many atop carved plateaus draped with bright green. At first, they passed locals with wagon and wheelbarrows bringing things to market in Nikar, or the occasional stray farm dog begging for treats, but by the end of the second day they walked through a thick forest wedged into the foothills of the nearby mountains.

They marched from dawn to dusk, taking short breaks to eat and stretch. Gunthar led Fearless the llama for an hour or two a day, but usually the task fell to Martin the Green who had a way with animals no one had noticed before.

“It’s a pack animal. I grew up on a farm,” Martin shrugged.

“Just remember,” Gunthar said to everyone. “Try not to use any fire magics or bring any kind of fire or heat near Fearless.”

“Why?” Ratchis asked, suspiciously.

“Uh... he doesn’t like it,” Gunthar replied lamely.

Ratchis opened his mouth to say something, but Martin interrupted. “He’s right, Ratchis. For once, take his word for it.”

The half-orc turned his suspicious eye to the watch-mage but said nothing more.

The third night, the full moon allowed Ratchis to disappear into the woods and return dragging an elk into the camp. They decided to rest half the next day to allow him to butcher it.

They spent their evenings continuing Ratchis’ reading lessons with Martin by candlelight, and occasionally the two of them would spend an entire watch whispering in orcish.

Martin also spent some time to practice using some spells, surprising Kazrack one morning by altering himself to look a lot like Tanweil had when in his true draconic form.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ See Sessions #53

Logan was quiet much of the time, save for when he and Dorn practiced saying the dwarven word for light with Kazrack in order to operate the brass medallions that the dwarf had crafted for the party, etched with the dwarven rune of light.

On the fifth day of marching, the forest suddenly dwindled out into nothing. A nasty blue-green blight was on all the trees and soon the Keepers of the Gate found themselves in a barren expanse of tall, jagged rocks cracked in many places by tiny streams coming from the northeast.

They cut east following the main stream back up into the mountains, hoping to avoid having to do any actual climbing for as long as possible and taking advantage of the clean cold water to bathe and refill their skins.

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The light of Ra's Glory beat down on the Keepers of the Gate as they marched single file through a narrow stream with broad sloping sides that turned more directly northward. Mid-day seemed to stretch out for hours, as they sucked down quart after quart of water from their skins. The stream they followed had become a narrow trickle of gritty stuff, and even though they had rested not long before to eat some lunch, exhaustion weighed down their legs.

Much earlier in the day they had noticed a column of smoke that emerged from the haze a mile or two to the east. They did not investigate, eager to avoid meeting up with anyone. Now the ravine cut three ways; the stream heading east, as the land before them in all directions rose up into barren bluffs. The center way broadened even as the walls became steeper, and the way to the west was the narrowest.

With an arcane word, Martin the Green shifted into his reptilian humanoid form modeled for Tanweil, and soon was breathing heavily as he flapped the small leathery wings with all his might; jerking back and forth awkwardly in the air when he tried to turn.

With another word he was invisible and gained a great deal of height to make slow wide circles and gauge the lay of the land.

Martin could see the narrow path to the east turned widely and then seemed to suddenly end at the foot of a craggy black hill. Clouds were rolling in from the west, obscuring visibility in that direction, but the broad ravine directly ahead made him gasp.

There was a collection of large stone houses atop the eastern bluff, and what looked like the remains of a curving wall, now only several huge stones here and there.

Smoke rose from a hole in the roof of one of the stone homes.

On the western bluff was some huge dug out area that seemed like it was once lined with a wall as well, though there were no intact buildings on that side. The west side of the ravine itself had large, once elaborate steps, now worn by years of weather. Halfway up the stair stood a giant pair of stone legs, the top of the statue apparently long gone.

Martin took an awkward swoop eastward to get a closer look at that avenue and found the trickle of stream emerged from a cave that led beneath the black craggy hill.

He turned and gained some more height again to enjoy the quiet of the wind on the slow descent, and then returned to the others, dismissing his *invisibility*.

Fearless spat and then coughed out a "maaa!" kicking a leg back angrily.

The watch-mage reached out and scratched the llama's head and it calmed again. He told the others what he had seen.

"I don't like it," Ratchis said. "Someone or something could live in those houses or be in that pit or whatever. If we continue north, they could ambush us. But I don't think we should risk the cave. The western route is too narrow to be safe. What does everyone else think?"

"I don't think I've ever heard you say ask that," Martin said, stunned.

"Ask what?" Ratchis said, confused.

"Asking what we all think," Martin replied, with a smirk.

Ratchis snarled.

"I'm against going underground," Logan said. "We have no idea where it comes out. It could be a dead end, for all we know."

"A good point, but I am always a proponent for going underground," Kazrack said.

"Dorn?" Ratchis turned to his henchman.

The shaggy-haired man rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged.

"I think Martin should make me invisible and I should go scout ahead myself, on foot," Ratchis said.

"If you feel we must..." Kazrack said.

"Just hurry your pig-ass up," Gunthar said, putting an oat-bag around the llama's head. "Unless you think this is a safe enough place to camp."

"The loudmouth has a point," Logan said.

"I'll be quick," Ratchis said, as Martin cast the spell.

"How long will it last?" Ratchis asked.

"Nearly an hour and a half," the mage said.⁵⁶

Ratchis took off for the bluff and climbed up quickly, driving his big, calloused hands into the earth when he could not find a rocky handhold. He rolled over atop the mossy bluff and let out a long low breath and stood. He reminded himself that he was invisible as he spotted the stone houses about a quarter mile ahead. But the sight of them was quickly washed away by the westward clouds that had finally rolled in with cool showers.

The half-orc made a dash for the buildings and then slowed up when they came into sight again, creeping along with all the speed he dared, hoping between the invisibility spell and the rain, he would not be noticed.

The stone houses were made of rounded slabs of sedimentary rock that was grayed and worn by centuries of weather. Ratchis could tell that the stones had been brought here from somewhere else. They did not match the scabble earth and shattered rock of the bluffs. It appeared there had once been many more of these stone homes, but now they were just piled slabs of stone, and even the ones in the best conditions had sunk partially into the ground.

One tall house was over twenty feet high, and it seemed like a great deal of it had sunken into the bluff, meaning it had once been even taller. There was cracked window casement on floor level that made for a jagged twelve-foot-tall entrance. Damp smoke rose from the crack and from unseen hole in the roof.

⁵⁶ **DM's Note:** In Aquerra, the invisibility spell lasts 10 minutes per level.

Ratchis made his way over there and put his back to the right side of the crack. From within he heard what sounded like some kind of humming punctuated with grunts. He leaned over, still cautious of being seen out of instinct, despite his invisibility, and looked in. The floor of the stone house was sunken another twenty feet, and a small smoldering fire in one corner spat gray smoke. There was a large figure wrapped up in a tattered piece of hide. Ratchis guessed its height at about nine feet.

Suddenly it sat up and looked to its right. Ratchis could see that what had once been the foundation of the house was cracked open to connect to some kind of huge caves or tunnels beneath the houses. In stepped a crouched figure that had to be at least 11 feet tall. It had stooped shoulders and a sloping forehead, and arms that seemed too long for its body and absently scratching its side. It was a female giant of some kind, wrapped in a tattered hide. She bellowed at the smaller figure, that Ratchis could now see had yellow skin and a large craggy head, an ogre.

The ogre threw off its blanket and with fear in its large yellow eyes began to climb up towards the crack. Ratchis quickly retreated.

The ogre ran to another of the houses and soon returned with an arm full of wood and a sack over its shoulder. Ratchis watched from a safe distance, and when it was back in the house, he crept over to check the other places. Most were empty. Some smelled strongly of feces and rot. Others seemed a place to store wood and ratty furs. The soft ground gave sign to his trained eye that at least half dozen ogres and a few giants walked back and forth here with some regularity.

He headed back southward and climbed down and made his way to the steps on the other side of the ravine to check the great pit up on that bluff, before returning to the rest of the party.

“The pit on the other bluff looks like it used to be some kind of forge or foundry,” Ratchis explained. “There are bits of raw ore here and there, scorch marks, rusted and worn bits of old tools and even a weathered anvil that is over six feet tall and must weigh thousands of pounds, bolted to a rock.”

“Giants...” Kazrack muttered.

“So, what now? We go kill these giants and ogres, find what they have of value and move on?” Gunthar asked.

“No,” Ratchis spat.

“They’re giants!” Gunthar replied. “Evil, waylaying, baby-eating, stupid as a rock, giants! We’d be doing the world a favor!”

“I hate to say this, but I agree,” Kazrack said. “These are the ancient enemy of my people. It would be good to slay them all.”

“I think you are forgetting that I am the ancient enemy of your people, too,” Ratchis said. “If we are to go by tradition. These giants haven’t done anything to us, and we cannot risk being delayed. If we miss when the opening to Hurgun’s Maze is revealed, who knows if there will be another opportunity...?”

“And we cannot know for certain how many there are,” Martin the Green added. “Remember how tough the fight against that one stone giant was.”⁵⁷

“Okay, so we try to slip past,” Logan said. “But they will probably attack if they see us and throw rocks from atop the bluffs. That is, if anything I have heard about giants is true. I’ve never encountered any before.”

“Don’t worry, kid,” Gunthar replied. “We’ll get Martin to hold your hand as we march if yer scared.”

⁵⁷ See Sessions #52 & #53

Logan stared down the Neergaardian.

“Your face’ll get stuck that way if you are not careful,” Gunthar warned. “Didn’t your mother ever tell you that? And trust me your mom knows about making faces; if you know what I mean...”

“I warned you about that...” Logan began, reaching for the hilt of his sword.

“Enough! Now is not the time for this,” Ratchis admonished them both. He turned to Martin the Green. “Martin, can you make us all invisible?”

The watch-mage shook his head. “Limited components. Even if I took the time to re-prepare some spells, I do not think it is worth it to spend all the Thrician gum at once.”^{58 59}

“I guess we are going to have to go kill the giants, then,” Kazrack concluded. “Get them before they get us.”

“No, it means we’ll wait here and rest while we can and then move out just before dawn under cover of darkness,” Ratchis pointed. “The sun will come up over there casting shadows in that ravine that we can use to our advantage.”

“Maa!” Fearless the Llama said.

”And you will cast silence on the llama,” Ratchis added, turning to Kazrack.

The dwarf nodded.

Osilem, the 17th of Quark – 565 H.E.

It was still raining when they crept out just before dawn. The llama protested, as Martin pulled it along, but no sound emerged from its twisted mouth, as Kazrack’s spell had been cast on its harness. Gunthar lagged behind, sword in hand, but half asleep, while Ratchis and Logan took point.

As Ra’s Glory rose to their left, they found that the opposite end of the ravine ascended gently, giving way to a verdant slope awash with many shades of green and yellow, and glistening in the last rain being broken up by the arriving sun. Beyond it stood a black mountain that they would have to contend with in a few days’ time.

“This valley is so green,” Logan said. “I wonder why the giants choose to live in broken down old stone houses atop barren bluffs?”

“Exactly,” Kazrack replied. “Think of what must live here to keep them out.”

“Yeah, I have a bad feeling,” Ratchis said. “Let’s hurry past this place.”

They had not gone far when they saw what it was. A winged reptilian form cast its shadow across the thick trees. The Keepers of the Gate all looked up to see a purple and black monstrosity nearly thirty feet long with a long sinewy tale flapping around behind it. The tail ended in a black bony point. In the thing’s jaws was a large humanoid form, now looking ragged and frail, as its two halves bobbed with every flap of the thing’s black wings.

“Isis have mercy!” Martin hissed. “A wyvern!”

Without discussion, Ratchis cast silence on the llama, as Kazrack’s original casting had long expired, and Martin cast levitate on Kazrack, so the now weightless dwarf could now be pulled along like a balloon by Ratchis, as he and the rest hustled past the woods.

⁵⁸ Wizards can trade out spells already prepared for others by spending 15 minutes per spell level per spell.

⁵⁹ The material component for the invisibility spell is an eyelash pressed into a bit of Thrician gum.

They marched on through the rest of the day, reaching a long plain that ended in the dark horizon of the mountain they had seen a couple of days before. On the brink of exhaustion, they continued on into the night to put as much room as possible between them and the wyvern.

Ratchis finally relented of his impossible pace only after Logan, Gunthar and Dorn began to lag behind so often, even Kazrack was ahead of them; the levitation spell had long expired.

The half-orc made a camp in a thicket, doing his best to camouflage it, as the others just passed out where they had thrown their bodies to the ground.

Ralem, the 22nd of Quark – 565 H.E.

Several days later, the Keepers of the Gate had made their way past the first of the mountains, led by Ratchis through deep undercuts made in them by cold streams. In this way they were able to avoid the worst of the climbing, and where they did have to climb some, they found the llama was deft and leaping up onto rocks and from one to another, as long as they were not too high or too far apart.

Beyond this, was a world ringed by mountains. It was a grassy highland many miles across and marked with many streams and ponds and littered with huge stones left behind by retreating glaciers thousands of years before. The high plain was broken up by great jagged ridges that rose and fell as if the hard earth had once been sand, and some colossus had dragged its feet walking back and forth.

As usual, Ratchis took point, leaving Logan to lead the rest of the group and he jogged ahead to each rise, squatting down, and looking over to make sure nothing awaited them beyond. He would jog back and forth all day, seemingly tireless, reporting what he saw, and for two days it had always been ‘all clear.’

One hazy mid-morning, Ratchis made his way to the top of a ridge, expecting to see the rest of the plain beyond, but instead it was a ragged ravine that ran east from the mountains to a river the party had noticed at the western border of the plain. Movement on the opposite ridge caught his eye, and he lowered himself down even more. It was twelve, or perhaps sixteen, humanoid figures, picking their way up the opposite ridge and over it.

It was hard to tell what they were exactly, but something about their ragged line, and the spears or poles that some had over one shoulder, made him think they were high orcs. He waited until the last one disappeared over the top, counted slowly to fifty, and then went after them to see where they were going.

As Ratchis climbed the next ridge, going very slowly because he was aware that he was kicking up small clouds of red and yellow clay dust, he heard a sound coming from the other side that for a second he thought was the ocean; but the ocean was several hundred miles away.

He poked his head over and gasped. The highland plain below stretched out for miles amid the wide loops of a narrow river, and there was an enormous camp. The roar of voices came up from amid the many tents, hasty lean-tos and various red and green banners. It was definitely orcs; scores and scores of them.

Ratchis hurried back to the others.

“Orcs,” Ratchis told them. “Scores, maybe two hundred, maybe more.”

“So, we’re gonna go kill them?” Gunthar asked.

“Why don’t you go ahead and the rest of us will catch up? Logan shot at the Neergaardian.

“Aw, is itty bitty Logan scared of some orcs?” Gunthar teased.

“From the look of the camp they have their women and young with them, which means there are even more orcs around in hunting and scouting parties,” Ratchis continued, ignoring them. “We need to avoid them. We’ll go west

and hope we can find a way to get across the river and travel around close to those western mountains and avoid them all.”

“You hear that, Logan? They have their babies with them. I’m sure we can find some babies for you to kill,” Gunthar said. “We know all about killing orc babies. Right, Snuffles?”⁶⁰

“Shut up!” Kazrack barked.

“Let’s go, and keep it down,” Ratchis said, and headed west.

End of Session #74

AQUERRA

⁶⁰ See Session #66

Session #75

Up and out of the ravine they hurried, making towards the river, which cut out the edge of the steep barren hill that bordered the western side of the plain. They could hear the hundred or more orcs cheering and roaring in great number in their camp on the other side of the rise.

Each time after he led the party off to a copse of trees to hide and wait for his return, Ratchis hurried ahead to assure that the path was clear. It was very slow going, and twice Logan complained that speed to outdistance the threat was the better solution. Ratchis nodded but continued doing it his way.

In the long light of the late afternoon, they made a dash for a series of tall vertical rocky outcrops on the edge of where the river came around the great bluff. The outcrops looked like they had long ago been worn into drooping columns of brown gritty stone by the flooding of the river. The water could be clearly heard, and the orc camp was several miles behind them to the east.

“Wait!” Ratchis hissed, putting up a hand. There was another sound reaching them over the sound of the water. Larger splashing and harsh deep voices. There were orcs in the river ahead, obscured from view by the stone pillars. The half-orc ranger crept forward to check it out and returned quickly.

“Little more than a dozen,” he whispered to the others. “They’re fishing. We’ll wait here for them to go on their way and then make it across the river.”

Gunthar leaned against one of the outcroppings looking exasperated.

“We can kill that many, easy,” Logan whispered back. Gunthar nodded.

“And then have another two hundred on our backs?” Ratchis sneered. “No.”

“He has a point,” said Kazrack. “We may be spotted here and have to fight anyway. Why not get it over with quick and hurry across the river. Maybe by the time they are noticed we will be long gone, and anyway, can’t you cover our trail?”

“And maybe there are more of them around the bend in the river, or maybe one will get away in the confusion, or very likely one has a horn to blow as a warning,” Ratchis replied, gritting his teeth to keep his voice down. “And they are very likely have adept trackers with them. It is not worth the risk.”

“I agree,” said Martin. “Let’s stay alert in case we do have to fight them, but if we can avoid being spotted at all we certainly should do so.”

“Bloody pansies!” Gunthar swore, too loud.

“Keep it down!” Ratchis hissed.

“Look, I’ll go kill them myself,” Gunthar said. “There are only, what? Fourteen of them? No problem.”

“Heh, go ahead,” Logan said.

“You saying I can’t take on a dozen piggies myself?”

“I’m saying I would like to see you try,” Logan replied.

Gunthar pulled his sword and began to walk through the rough pillars towards the river. Ratchis stepped in front of him.

“No one is going anywhere,” he said. “We’re waiting.”

Kazrack and Martin nodded.

An hour passed, and still the loud orcish voices splashed in the river. Martin made himself and Ratchis invisible and they crept forward to listen in on the conversation.

“You better catch more fish than that,” said one of the loudest orcs. Though invisible, the two Keepers of the Gate remained out of sight lest their footprints or breathing might give them away.

“Yeah, if she is returning tonight like the shaman says she may be hungry,” said a whiny voice that wheezed a lot.

“If she’s hungry and we haven’t brought enough fish we’ll all be fed to her, so shut up and get some more,” said another raspier voice.

“By Ashronk’s Eye! There she is! She’s returning! Grab what you got and let’s go!” said the first voice again.

The splashing became more frantic, and the rest of the party could hear the footfalls and grunts of the orcs as they ran past through the rocking outcropping, but never coming over to their end of the group of stone pillars.

Martin and Ratchis sat very still as orcs in patchwork studded leather armor, with bows on their back and spears in their hands, went bounding past them. Half of them had bulging sacks over their shoulders and the water that dripped through the canvas was flung in all directions with each bounding step.

Soon, they were gone.

“Did you see that?” Logan pointed to the darkening sky to the east. Kazrack and Dorn looked, and both thought they could see the shadow of something descend from a cloud toward where the orc camp would be.

“What was that?” Kazrack asked.

“It looked, well... draconic to me,” Logan said, a bit of nervousness crept into his voice.

“The wyvern?” Martin asked, coming back to the others, but still invisible. They all jumped.

“Next time let us know you are returning before you speak so suddenly like that,” Kazrack spat.

“And how should we do that, whistle?” Ratchis replied, invisible as well. “And we all know that was not the wyvern. That is the ‘she’ the orcs were talking about. They used the word ‘tashmar’.”⁶¹

“Tashmar? That’s like ‘big smart monster’ right?” Martin guessed.

“With the ‘thot’ inflection, and the fact that when they ran past, I could see they had a dragon tattoo about their neck and down their left arm...” Ratchis began.

“Wait, you have that same tattoo,” Kazrack interrupted.

“Yes,” the half-orc replied. “These are the Darksh. My people. Or at least a group that has their origins with them, and that is why I know that was not the wyvern you saw. It was the dragon.”

“All the more reason to get out of here,” Dorn said,

“I’m with the cabin boy,” Gunthar said. “That dragon is the reason plans were invented, and I am not ready to spring the plan.”

⁶¹ The orcish language has a very limited vocabulary and often re-uses many of the same words for various degrees of meaning or variations of qualities by apply certain inflections and guttural nuances to them.

“Why do you think they are gathering here?” Kazrack asked.

“I am not sure, but we are far south of their usual territory,” Ratchis replied. “Whatever the reason, we cannot afford to stay here much longer.”

Martin nodded. “A dragon’s senses are acute. She might already know we are here.”

Ratchis ran off to make sure the orcs were really gone and then he led the party across the river and westward up on to the bluffs before being able to slowly move northeastward again, which would be many miles and days from now.

Isilem, the 23rd of Quark

As evening of the next day fell the Keepers of the Gate followed an ever-widening gorge on their right created by the river now far below. The path they followed was strewn with sharp rocks and steep in many places. Several times the llama’s cries echoed against the bluff, causing everyone to look around expectantly, but nothing ever came.

Ratchis was annoyed. He had thought that there would be a way to cross the gorge or go down into it and find a way up the other side before darkness, but as the gorge became wider and wider this seemed to be less and less likely.

Martin the Green looked at his maps again and again, but they were not detailed enough to give any clue of the best route.

The Keepers of the Gate were about ready to give up and find the best campsite they could when they came around a corner and there creaking in the breeze was a rope bridge with wooden slats, reaching across a narrower portion of the gorge. It was about seventy feet to the other side.

“Can you use a bow?” Ratchis asked Logan as the party approached the bridge. The other side was getting harder and harder to see with each passing moment.

Logan nodded.

“Use this,” the half-orc passed the young Herman-Lander the composite bow he had purchased back in Summit months before. “But it is just a loan.”⁶²

“Okay,” Logan replied, and he fit an arrow to it and smiled as he pulled it back to his chin. The others stood ready as well, as Ratchis began to slowly make his way across the bridge.

The bridge protested with each careful step of the half-orc, and he clutched onto the rope handles as it jerked back and forth from his weight and the wind. He looked down and there was only darkness and the echoed gurgle of the river below.

Suddenly, the rope bridge began to jerk more violently. A tall shadowy loping figure was making its way from the other side of the bridge. It had long arms, which it used to leap across the bouncing boards.

“Troll!” Ratchis cried, turning around to get back to the side of the bridge where his companions awaited.

Logan let two arrows fly into the lumbering form as it emerged from the darkness and Dorn moved up onto a rock to get a shot from the left. The missiles buried themselves deep into the green and yellow mottled flesh of the humanoid monster, but it did not slow.

⁶² **DM’s Note:** This bow is built to give a bonus to damage up to a Strength score of 14.

Ratchis leapt around and drew his great sword as he made it to the end of the bridge, and drawing his halberd, Kazrack stepped beside him, blocking egress from the bridge.

The voices of the half-orc and the dwarf called to their respective gods to grant them *bull's strength*.

“*Lentus!*” chanted Martin and the monster stopped, though its wiry black locks flapped beneath its chin, but the watch-mage could tell it was not because it had been affected by the spell.

The troll began to back up in the direction it came from, eyeing Kazrack and Ratchis readied at the end of the bridge. It snarled as another arrow from Logan cut through one of its long, pointed ears.

“It’s retreating!” Kazrack cried, and suddenly the monster was no longer on the bridge, but leaping high in the air and down at the two of them, screaming with horrific glee.

Ratchis stepped back as a claw reached for his face and brought his great sword down on the troll’s shoulder as he withdrew from the ferocity of the attack. Kazrack barely managed to duck the thing’s other sinewy arm and drew back as well. They had successfully drawn the eager monster off the bridge.

Logan dropped the bow and drew his long sword, throwing his body into a shoulder roll to avoid the thing’s claws, and then leaping to his feet and slashing the thing in the chest and upper thigh.

Two more crossbow bolts buried themselves into the troll, flying from the weapons of Martin and Dorn. It spun around and found Kazrack’s halberd being shoved into its face. Green blood spurted out and it screamed and broke its own teeth biting at the metal. The dwarf used his leverage to turn it towards Ratchis who brought two merciless blows down on the back of the thing’s neck. There was a loud crack and it collapsed to the ground.

It lay there for a second, and then Kazrack pierced its side with his pole-arm, shoving the blade deep into its innards.

Gunthar stood ten feet away, his swords resting on his shoulders and laughed. He threw both blades into the dirt and grabbed a flask of oil from his pack on the llama and began to pour it over the troll’s corpse.

Ratchis cut its arms and legs off and piled them up, and Martin lit a torch to the thing. The thing’s head began to scream, but then gurgled and was silent. Soon all that was left was a black tarry ash.

“So that’s a troll, huh?” Logan said. “Doesn’t seem so bad.”

“Let’s just hope there aren’t more,” Ratchis said.

“And they are bad, very bad,” Martin added. “We just happen to know how to defeat them.”

“And if he has brothers it might still get bad,” Ratchis said.

It took nearly an hour for the group to cross the bridge one at a time and bound with a rope. Ratchis went first, followed by Logan. Logan then kept watch as Ratchis held the rope and helped the others across. Gunthar and Martin struggled to get Fearless to walk across the bridge, but finally Ratchis went across and calmed the animal and led it across himself.

“I’m really surprised the llama’s cries hasn’t drawn the attention of more mon. . .,” Martin spun around as a tall figure leapt out of the darkness. This side of the bluff was dotted with low spindly barren trees in tall weedy grass, and for a moment it seemed as if one of the trees had come to life.

“*Lentus!*” Martin cried, and this time it worked. The new troll’s ferocity was suddenly comic in slow motion.

Kazrack charged it and thrust his halberd into its chest, drawing a bloom of green blood to join that of the last troll still staining his chest plate and helm.

Once again Logan, sword in hand, tumbled within the thing's reach too quickly for it to react, and slashed deep into it. Dorn tried to follow but felt the weight of the thing's claws rake his brow and he fell onto his rear.

"Why not take a load off, cabin boy?" Gunthar quipped, moving to pin the monster in from the left, as Ratchis came around from the right.

The troll brought its arms close; as if trying to bear hug Logan, but the small man ducked and twisted backward bringing his sword down across the thing's forearms, slicing tendons. The thing screamed and waved the arms about throwing showers of blood in all directions.

"Don't give it a chance to heal!" Ratchis cried, bringing his own sword down on its back. It stumbled back toward Logan who chopped it as it fell.

Kazrack moved to drive his halberd into this troll as well, but it leapt to its feet, and swung one of its arms at the dwarf. The blow rang on the dwarf's armor but did no harm. Ratchis hacked the thing again, and again it fell. Logan drove his sword through the thing's shoulder until it bit the earth beneath, pinning the troll there as Dorn poured oil all over it. In a moment it was burning.

Not forty feet down the embankment, Ratchis spotted an earthen hut built partially into the ground. It had a straw roof supported with uncut logs and plastered with feces, mud, and grease. He and Kazrack tore the roof off and the smell that came out was revolting.

"No more trolls in here," Logan said, using the light of the medallion Kazrack had made to see by.

"We'll search it in the morning," Ratchis said. "Let's move away from here a few hundred yards and find a place to camp."

Teflem, the 27th of Quark – 565 H.E.

Four days later they marched down into another pleasant valley set within tall green hills. They had left the jagged bluffs of the trolls and their hut, long behind. Within the hut were the mostly eaten corpses of three gnomes, shreds of their armor and scattered gems and silver obleks, which the party collected. Gunthar took the biggest gem, a diamond, for himself; assuring everyone that he was just holding it. They took the time to bury the gnomes under rock cairns.

This place was much more hospitable. The trees here were growing tiny red mid-summer apples, and the birds sang sweetly along with a babbling brook that wound lazily around the valley.

"I know it's only just after noon, but maybe we should rest here the rest of the day and leave again tomorrow," Ratchis suggested. "We have been making good pace and this is a good place to replenish some supplies, get fresh water, collect some apples and nuts and I can go do some hunting with Logan and Dorn."

The others agreed and began to set camp.

"Thanks for reminding me about noon," Martin commented to Ratchis. "Casting the detect scrying spell slipped my mind. I do it every day at noon as to not forget since it lasts twenty-four hours."

"Uh-huh," Ratchis grunted, walking off to deal with his gear.

Martin the Green spent the next ten minutes casting the intricate spell, as Dorn pitched the tent and Gunthar carefully unpacked the llama. Logan gathered firewood, while Kazrack figured out in which direction was the First Mountain so he could properly place his prayer stone.

"Uh-oh," Martin gulped. He looked around the camp wildly, and then walked calmly over to where Ratchis was laying his gear out on his hyenadon skin.

“Uh, Ratchis? We’re being watched.” Martin whispered.

“Uh?” the half-orc looked up.

“We are being scryed on,” the watch-mage said. “By not one, not two, but three different sources. Right now.”

Ratchis sighed and stood up and walked over to Kazrack.

“Martin says we’re being watched,” Ratchis said.

“Try not to make it obvious we know,” Martin hissed, hurrying over.

“What does it matter? Maybe they’ll stop watching!” Kazrack said. “Anyway, I will call upon the favor of my gods to dispel their evil magic.”

“It is three different people,” Martin whined. “Who could it be?”

“Probably Rindalith,” Ratchis suggested. “And Mozek.”

“Oh, one just disappeared,” Martin announced. “I can try to find out who it is that is watching by concentrating my will against theirs. I’m going to try.”

Martin the Green closed his eyes and concentrated his will towards one of the sensors that were now visible to him. The darkness behind his lids gave way to a gray mist that roiled and expanded, and then crystallized. He felt as if he could push through and the vision shattered to reveal the form of a man with a well-kept red beard and bright green eyes, he wore familiar crimson robes. He was in a large room, with a cracked wall behind him and natural broken light raining down from above. The man sat on the floor and looked into a crystal ball upon a small pedestal before him.

It was Richard the Red.

Richard looked up as if he were aware of Martin’s presence and smiled and then he waved a hand before his face and all was black again. When Martin opened his eyes another of the sensors was gone.

“It was Richard.”

“Well, whoever it was there is still one watcher left, correct?” Kazrack asked.

Martin nodded.

“Lords and Lady, please grant me your divine righteousness to undo the weave of foul arcane magics that seek to spy on us from afar, and whatever else might lurk in this area and do us harm,” the dwarf intoned, shaking his bag of runestones.”

“What the...!” Gunthar cried out, and there was a sound of alarm from Logan and Dorn as well. The small trees all around and the soft green grass had all disappeared. The place was actually much more barren, the few trees did hold fruit, but the grass was hard and yellowed, and stones were piled all about.

“There must have been another spell in place here,” Martin said. “*Hallucinatory Terrain*. I am familiar with the spell and can cast it myself.”

“Break camp, everyone, we are getting out of here,” Ratchis said.

“The sensor still watches,” Martin said.

"I figured as much," Ratchis said. "And whoever is watching probably cast that spell to make this place more inviting. We go."

The party angrily re-packed their stuff, and Fearless let loose a wail, protesting at having the weight of the gear back on his back so soon, but they marched north out of the valley and into the craggy foothills of the nearby wall of mountains.

Osilem, the 3rd of Keent – 565 H.E.

After two days of marching up and up into the cold air of the mountains, The Keepers of the Gate had barely made eight miles of progress in the last day and a half. The going was very steep and very treacherous most of the way, and twice the llama had to have *levitation* cast on it to get it up the sheer climbs. Frantic, it kicked and spat despite Ratchis' efforts to calm it, though it quickly became quiet again when its feet were on solid ground.

They climbed down into a rectangular gully and were not sure of which way to go. A narrow path with tall stone walls wound off to the east and seemed to go underground, while a series of plateaus seemed to lead to a higher path that veered northward.

It was decided that Martin would talk his dragon-man form and become *invisible* to get a better vantage of a way to go by using his arcane eye spell.

Up among the cold mountain winds, Martin the Green took his time surveying the land all about him, and then sent his unseen eye to scan the distant horizon and look around the mountains that blocked the party's way.

He conveyed what he had seen of the ways to go when he came back down.

"The narrow winding way does go underground, and I could not determine where and if it came back out, though there was a place where a stream poured out of a great cleft in the mountains miles east of here, that might have been it," Martin explained. "The other route is not all that much more promising. Several plateaus lead over the mountain and down towards a stone highway that crosses a gorge. It looks like a road paved long ago, and on the other side of the gorge is a fortress cut out of a black stone bluff, with towers and a gate. It looked like there were dwarves there."

"Then that settles it," Kazrack said, with a smile.

"That route is going to require us to use at least four more *levitation* spells to get the llama up and over, and there is also a nest overlooking the midway point," Martin added.

"A nest?" Logan asked.

"Yes, giant eagles," Martin said. "I saw them flying around and swooping towards where our path is. Their nest overlooks it."

"We will have to hope they will leave us be," Ratchis said. "As much as I would like to avoid a fortress full of dwarves, going underground when we don't know which way, if any, leads out is the worse choice."

"Why would you not want to go to a fortress of dwarves?" Kazrack asked; his brow furrowed.

"He's a pig-fucker," Gunthar said matter-of-factly.

"But he is also my friend and companion in arms," Kazrack said. "I will explain to them the situation and we will get a good night's rest and plenty of mutton and mead before we move on."

"You still haven't learned anything about your kin, have you?" Ratchis asked, shaking his head.

"If you were a normal half-orc I would agree," Kazrack insisted. "But you favor your man-half. It will be okay."

"I hope you are right," Ratchis sighed. "But I doubt it."

Kazrack frowned.

Several hours later, just after *levitating* the llama up its second sheer climb (this one, eighty feet), and giving it a few moments to stop spitting and hissing, they heard the loud snap of wings and a sudden wind. Before them, blocking their path at the top of the next embankment was a huge eagle. Its wingspan was over twenty feet, and it half-opened its wings twice while awkwardly moving to turn its head and keep a darting eye on the party.

The path over the mountain was less than forty feet wide in many places, and on either side either sheer walls or sheer drop offs. Here, the shadow of the peak of the mountain hung over path on the left, and sheer rock wall sixty feet high blocked off a drop to water several hundred below.

The eagle was gold in color, save for bright red feathers than lined its wings and about its head. It turned its head with a jerky bird motion and looked at the party with its other eye, clicking its bulbous tongue in its wicked beak.

Ratchis raised his open hands and took a step forward.

"None shall pass this way, Son of Joacham," the eagle squawked, clicking his beak, and pointing it up in the air while ruffling the feathers of his neck to re-create the guttural tones of dwarvish tongue.

"Was that. . ?" Ratchis looked back to his dwarven friend, and Kazrack took half a step forward.

"By whose order?" Kazrack asked. "If it is yours and we have trespassed on your territory we beg forgiveness, but we must pass through here."

"By order of your kin," the eagle replied. It jerked its head around again, spying them with the other eye and clicking twice. "We watch the western pass as was long ago agreed when our grandfathers' grandfathers were hatchlings. None may pass this way without leave of the dwarves of Adothroch, and certainly not one who reeks of the blood of the boar-god."

The eagle's eye turned to Ratchis and half opened its wings again suddenly, taking alight for a half second. Everyone started, fearing the eagle was about to attack.

Kazrack told the others what the eagle had said.

"Is there no way to buy passage?" Martin asked.

"I might let you and your companions through to speak with your kin yourself," the eagle replied, understanding the watch-mage and now speaking in halting common, but speaking only to Kazrack. "But I would need a token, a morsel to bring to my nest."

The eagle's eye darted over to the llama. "But even then, the boar-blood may not pass."

"I would be willing to give the llama to the eagle, but not if it isn't going to buy passage for all of us," Ratchis said to his companions.

"Easy for you to say, it isn't your llama, and it isn't carrying any of your bloody stuff, Snuffles," Gunthar swore.

"Will you let me pass alone?" Kazrack asked the eagle. "I am a rune-thrower, a servant of the dwarven gods and of the dwarven people. I can be trusted."

The eagle jerked its head up and down and then whipped it around and hopped back.

“I will return having obtained passage for all my companions from the dwarves,” Kazrack added.

“You may pass,” the eagled cawed. “But the others must retreat back to the gully.”

It was agreed, and Kazrack went on as the others drew back to the gully where they made camp.

End of Session #75

AQUERRA

Session #76

Kazrack hoisted himself up to the tallest plateau and took a moment to look around and breathe in deep the cold mountain air rushing about him. He thanked Natan-ahb and the other dwarven gods for giving him the chance to walk these mountains alone and appreciate them, and then he climbed down towards the gorge. Soon, the fortress was in view.

The rune-thrower crossed the gorge by way of a wide natural stone bridge lined with low crumbling walls of black stone. It looked as if many holes and cracks in the bridge had been recently filled in.

The fortress itself might have been mistaken as a simple stone bluff from a distance. The towers on both sides seemed to have been carved from the cliff itself, and were ringed with seemingly asymmetrical crenulations, but Kazrack knew the careful planning and measurement that must have gone into each feature just from looking at it.

The other side of the mountain face the highway cleft in twain was lower and ragged.

There was a partial wall about fifteen feet tall closing off part of the far side of the bridge. And he called out as he approached it.

“Ho there! Brother dwarves! One of your kind approaches!” he called in his own tongue as he came around the wall. “Hello?”

“Halt!” cried a voice from atop the tower. Kazrack could see that the actual entrance to the fortress was several hundred yards further down the stone highway. “Who comes by the old south road?”

“It is I, Kazrack Delver of Llurgh-Splendar-Tar by way of Verdun, rune-thrower of the gods of our grandfathers!”

“Wait there! A guard will be sent to escort you to the gate.”

Kazrack was made to wait, as the light grew long. Eventually two armored dwarves came out from the gate, though he had not heard it open.

One of the dwarves wore splint mail and full black beard stuck out from beneath his full helm; a great axe rested on one shoulder. He had a pouch of runestones tied tightly about his neck. The other dwarf wore chain mail and carried a black shield decorated with a gold mountain. He wore an open face helm and had a brown beard and a young face.

The dwarf in the full helm pulled it off and smiled.

“Master Delver! It really is you!” the black-bearded dwarf cried. He was swarthy and had a star-shaped scar above his right eye. It was Captain Adalar Barnath.⁶³

“Captain Adalar! It does my heart good to see you here!” Kazrack grasped wrists with his former companion. “It is good fortune provided by Hodenar that I would meet you at this point in my journey back to Gothanius.”⁶⁴

“Perhaps more fortunate than you know,” Captain Adalar replied. “We had reason to suspect you might be coming this way, though we had no way to be certain.”

“How so?” Kazrack asked, confused.

“It is not my place to speak of it,” Adalar replied. “Come. Let us bring you within the fortress so that General Aronlar can talk with you when he is free of his other many duties.”

⁶³ Captain Adalar was the leader of the dwarves that accompanied Belear Gritchkar from Abarrane-Abaruch to aid the Fearless Manticore Killers in rescuing the Garvan gnomes from their fiendish kin. (See Session #37 thru #52)

⁶⁴ Hodenar is the dwarven god of merchants, travel, and song.

The other dwarf nodded but did not speak a word. Kazrack was led to the fortress.

Warmth and the palpable stench of animals kept in close quarters hit him as he stepped through a small door fashioned in the much larger black metal gate.

“Welcome to Adothrech,” Captain Adalar said.

Small smoky fires and dim lanterns hanging from the support beams lighted the huge, enclosed courtyard. He could see a secondary wall with a crenulated balustrade and another large gate.

“Before we go any further, perhaps we can go back and get the rest of my companions,” Kazrack asked. “The eagle would not let them pass.”

“It is not in my jurisdiction to allow or disallow that,” Adalar said. “You will have to ask the general.”

“Well, I was hoping you might help me, as I fear that the presence of my companion, Ratchis, who I call D’nar, will not win us permission. But you know him.”

“I cannot. I do not have the jurisdiction to interfere in such decisions of security,” Adalar replied.

“Well, at least someone should be told lest a patrol happen upon them,” Kazrack said. “I would not want a misunderstanding to lead to bloodshed.”

“I will inform the general right after I lead you to a place where you can wait,” Adalar nodded. “How many are you in total?”

Kazrack counted on his fingers, “Uh... six, plus a llama.”

Captain Adalar led Kazrack through the courtyard. The silent dwarf left, joining several groups of dwarven soldiers doing drills on the right. They all wore chain shirts and had shields and axes. In total, Kazrack guessed there were close to four dozen.

“Are you preparing for war?” Kazrack asked.

“I will have to let the General decide what you can be told after he speaks with you,” Adalar replied, looking down. “I am sorry, Master Delver, but my duty decrees that I follow his orders. I mean no disrespect.”

“I understand,” Kazrack said.

To the left, Kazrack saw the source of the stench, over a dozen large wooden pens over sunken areas of the courtyard. Within were many of the great riding lizards he had seen long ago on the road to Bountiful. There were more dwarves on this side of the courtyard, some were tending to the beasts and others were saddling one and preparing to leave on it. There were three dwarves working at a small smithy in one corner as well.

Kazrack was led through the inner gate, and he could see partially enclosed ramparts set with small swiveling ballistae atop the wall, with more dwarves stationed at them. Beyond the gate was a labyrinth of narrow hallways and stairs paved in stony cement. Finally, Kazrack was brought to a small cell in a hall of many identical doors. Within, the stone had been shaped into furniture.

“The general will send for you when he is ready,” Captain Adalar said. “We ask that you wait here.”

“Could you wait with me? There is much I would like to tell you and to hear of your journeys since we parted ways in Garvan,” Kazrack asked.

“Alas, I cannot,” the captain replied. “I am on duty, but I will make sure to see you again before you leave.”

Kazrack took his prayer stone from his pack and aligned it with black metal plaque on one wall and prostrated himself before it in prayer.⁶⁵

He realized he had dozed off when there was a knock on the door. The stiffness of his body told him he had been in that position for hours.

The door opened as Kazrack stood and a young dwarf with a golden beard and big blue eyes entered the room.

“The general will see you now, Master Delver,” the young dwarf said. “If you will follow me.”

Kazrack was led through another maze of halls, rooms and stairs that reminded him of the close confines of the sunken chambers of the Pit of Bones.⁶⁶ He walked past another smithy, and a room where several dwarves were working with leather, and a huge armory in which were scores and scores of shields, battle-axes, crossbows, quarrels, spears, hammers, maces, swords, and other weapons.

General Aron-lar had a voluminous brown beard, decorated with two thick braids that rested on the rest of the facial hair, and had stone beads woven into them. At the end of each braid was tied a small gold medallion that Kazrack recognized as being medals given for extreme valor in combat, and for tactical thinking.⁶⁷ He clicked a pipe in his mouth as he stood from behind a large stone desk covered in clay tablets and papers. He wore simple black clothing and as he extended his right hand to grasp wrists, Kazrack noticed a large two-finger gold ring encrusted with emeralds on his right hand.

“Kazrack Delver! Captain Adalar speaks very highly of you,” Aron-lar spoke with a friendliness that belied the permanent scowl on his thin purple lips. “It is providence that brings you here, I think.”

“You have need?” Kazrack asked. They continued to stand as they spoke.⁶⁸

“Not specifically, but it is always good to see a new dwarf face,” the general replied. “And then there is the matter of you being here when your name has come up so recently.”

“Oh? Has Captain Adalar told you of our travels?” Kazrack asked.

“Not very much,” Aron-lar said. “Only your aid of Garvan, and your journeys with Master Gritchkar which led to other adventures. And most importantly, that the threat to the gnomes was not so much demons as it is the neighboring humans.”

“Well, sir, really it is both and much more,” Kazrack explained. “It is for this reason that my companions and I are headed through here to Greenreed Valley.”

“Greenreed? Why Greenreed?”

“There is a nexus of power there,” Kazrack said. “Another example of the fickle and untrustworthy nature of human magic, which is causing much of the problems in the area, and that the demon-gnomes hope use to their advantage. Not to mention there are other forces that also seek the place out.”

“Perhaps we can be of aid then on your journey...”

“I must say, that was indeed my hope.”

⁶⁵ All dwarven houses of prayer and personal chambers have a plaque identifying the direction of the First Mountain for the proper alignment of prayer stones.

⁶⁶ See Sessions #59 thru #61

⁶⁷ Dwarves of all communities still grant medals and honors for war and combat based on that set down by Dwitachak Chem of the Third (and last) Great Dwarven Kingdom, the fall of which marks the end of the Second Age.

⁶⁸ There is a tradition among dwarves that all important talk should be done while standing.

“We are organizing here by order of the Thegn of Abarrane-Abaruch by request of the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium. This outpost had been long abandoned, but the original force to come here were preparing it and the road for the opening of more trade with the human kingdom if their king would agree to more terms amenable to our people. However, in light of recent events and the news that came to us through Master Gritchkar, more soldiers have been sent in case there is need of war against the humans, and to march to Greenreed Valley itself as a deterrent to the human forces,” the general explained.

“Well, I hope that it does not come to war and that peace talks will prevail,” Kazrack replied. “When we left Gothanuis my companion Martin the Green had arranged for the gnomes to parley with the humans.”

“Yes, well, as any good dwarf is taught, better toil than war,” Aron-lar said. “And perhaps when we arrive, we will not be needed, but we will not be going until we have organized enough to present a force to make the humans think twice about expanding into the gnomes’ lands.”

“The gnomes of Garvan have been our friends and allies for some time and we have dedicated ourselves to aiding them, however the danger presented by this nexus of power could threaten all of Derome-Delem. I am glad to know that you and the fine dwarves under your command will defend that charge we have had to leave momentarily unaddressed,” Kazrack said.

“It is an honor and a duty to fulfill the promises of our ancestors,” Aron-lar said. “And speaking of which, I take it the eagles of the western road would not allow your companions to pass?”

“No.”

“I find it strange,” the general said. “Even if your companions are not dwarves the eagles were likely to let you all pass based on your being a rune-thrower, though they might have asked for a toll.”

“Aye, they did, but they would still not let one of my companions pass,” Kazrack explained.

General Aron-lar’s furrowed his brow.

“You see, one of companions was spawned by the blood of our enemy,” Kazrack said, looking down. “He is only half-man, though he favors his man-half and has proven his worth many times over. I call him, D’nar.”

“Fah! No one with tainted blood may pass through the sacred lands except on the end of a dwarven spear!” Aron-lar’s demeanor changed, his thin scowl became more severe, and he looked Kazrack up and down with sudden disdain. “I am surprised you would sully yourself by associating with a monster.”

“He is a faithful companion.”

“Heh, the word of the softened hearts of city dwarves has not been exaggerated then...” Aron-lar trailed off. “No exception can be made in this thing and there can be no apology for it.”

Kazrack nodded, sadly.

“And now there is another matter,” the general’s tone remained firm and disapproving. “Did you have among your companions a priest of the human cat goddess?”

“Uh, yes... Kind of...” Kazrack nodded. “He was called Roland, but we have not seen him in weeks. He disappeared shortly before we left Nikar.”

“So, you did not send him ahead?”

“No... is he here?” Kazrack’s was puzzled.

“Yes, that is what I meant when I said your name had come up recently. He was captured some days ago by one of the eagles. He was trying to sneak through the pass, so they brought him here. At first, we thought he was a spy for the humans, as some maps show there being a temple of the cat goddess in the human kingdom, but when questioned he mentioned your name and claimed to be part of your group and sent ahead. However, Captain Adalar could not vouch that the human was truly part of your group. Can you vouch for him?”

Kazrack hesitated and thought it over.

“I cannot say I know him well enough to vouch for him. And are certainly elements of untruth in what he has said to you, but in my experience, humans can be quick to lie to save themselves,” he finally said. “Perhaps if I can talk to him, I can get a better idea if he is to be trusted at all. My companions and I were upset at his disappearance and worried that he had turned against us, leaving to warn our enemies of our plans.”

“Fine. I will arrange for you to be brought to him and then afterwards we will discuss what is to be done with him,” Aron-lar said. The dwarf walked over and opened the door and called in his servant. The young blonde dwarf that had led Kazrack here was still waiting in the hall. “Laban, please bring Master Delver to the prisoner and when he is done please bring him back to me,”

The young dwarf nodded and led Kazrack down two more levels to another maze of rooms.

“Awaken! You have a visitor!” Laban slammed on a small wooden door with a fist and then threw it open. The young dwarf gestured to Kazrack to go in. “I will await you here.”

Kazrack heard grumbling from within and then the dim light of a lantern. He went in. It was small cell room very similar to the one Kazrack had been waiting in. Roland was sitting on the stone bed, wearing a long shirt and woolen socks. His wavy hair was a mess, and his face was long and blanched despite his typical olive complexion.

“Roland...” Kazrack began.

“Ah! Kazrack! Thank Bast you are here,” Roland stood and smiled; the wrinkles of sleep evaporating from his baby-face. “Normally I do not appreciate being awakened in the middle of the night, but in this case, I will make an exception. I will just gather my things and get dressed and we can be going.”

“Sit down, Roland,” Kazrack said. “I have to ask you some questions, like... What brings you here? Why did you leave us without a word?”

“Oh... Uh, okay,” Roland scratched his chin, and plucked at the few wild hairs that were growing from his cheeks. He continued with an exasperated tone. “I simply decided it would be best if I went off by myself in panther form. I thought if I went ahead, I could check out the situation in Gothanius and around Greenreed Valley myself, set up in the temple of Bast you all told me about as a kind of headquarters, and not be associated, at least at first, with your group and with a half-orc who is generally hated. I thought I could ingratiate myself and learn something useful that perhaps none of your group could.”

“And that is what you told the dwarves here?” Kazrack asked.

“You wouldn’t believe how many times, yes!” Roland stood again and slipped on some trousers and reached for his waistcoat, which was folded on his pack. “Now if that settles it, can you get them to give me back my weapons and armor before we go? I might need them. Are the others here? Or nearby?”

“No wonder they think you’re a spy! You have acted foolishly,” Kazrack said.

“You are going to help me get out of here, right?” Roland sat back down and studied Kazrack’s expression.

“How can I help you? I still don’t understand why you left the way you did,” Kazrack said. “Your general trustworthiness is in doubt.”

“Fine! Why don’t you just leave me here then? Roland pouted.

“Okay, I’ll come back later,” Kazrack said, turning towards the door.

“Wait!” Roland leapt to his feet and grabbed Kazrack by the shoulder. “I explained to you already why I left, and I did leave a note with one of the acolytes to be brought to Mercy and Ratchis, but you know how young people can be...”

Kazrack harrumphed and left, having Laban lead him back to General Aron-lar’s office.

Interlude⁶⁹

Logan crept along a dark narrow alley that he recognized from his days in Teamsburg, beyond it was a small, abandoned plaza were ‘hazers’ scored Sparkleweed...⁷⁰ But something was not right. The Herman-lander realized he was being followed. There were the sounds of marching feet carrying heavy armor behind him to the left, and so he hurried forward, hoping to find a place to make his way to the roofs.

But still something else was not right, this plaza and the buildings around it had been blasted during the Black Island raid, but now it was as he remembered it from years before. Logan emerged into the small plaza noticing that the sky was starless, but the light of paper lanterns hung from on the walls from strings cut the darkness. Suddenly, there was music, and from the shadows came dancing couples.

Before Logan could process this sudden development, he was snatched up by a dancer, and found himself tangled up in trying to keep up. He did not know the steps. He looked frantically at the other couples and noticed for the first time that they all suffered from the horrible burns caused by Red God Fire.⁷¹

Logan looked to his partner and gasped. It was Esmerelda. A young playmate that was sold into indentured servitude with the rest of her family to pay their overwhelming debt.⁷² Except she looked older than Logan last remembered, she wasn’t more than nine then, but she would certainly be older than fourteen now, but that was about the age she appeared to him; in her tattered dress that is too small on her and blackened bare feet. Her brown hair was scorched straw, burned away from the right side of her head disfigured face.

And round and round they went to the music, Logan sensing that whoever was following him was now dancing as well, and as the couples formed concentric circles, the partners changed as the circles move in opposite directions.

Several dark armored figures passed by Logan hurriedly, and suddenly Gunthar was passing him by as well and flicking Logan’s nose. “You dancin’ with yer momma?” he sneered and danced on. Suddenly Esmeralda was in front of him again.

Except even though she looked exactly the same, Logan knew this was not her. It was Alexandra the Lavender. She opened her mouth to speak, and it was bloody and most of her teeth were cracked, as if she had been repeatedly beaten in the face.

“Logan,” she croaked. “You know who it is. This was the only way I could contact you and know that no one else would accidentally see it or overhear.”

⁶⁹ This interlude was played out via email between sessions #75 and #76.

⁷⁰ ‘Hazer’ is the nickname for those addicted to magical narcotic, Sparkleweed, popular in Teamsburg.

⁷¹ Developed by followers of the Red God of the West during the time of their first kingdom in the Third Age, Red God Fire is made through a long closely guarded alchemical process. It stored in clay flasks with long twisted cloth wicks. When lit and thrown, the flask shatters and the volatile contents explode, sticking to flesh as it burns.

⁷² At the time Logan asked his father to pay their debt, but his father explained that a watch-mage could not give special treatment to people in his community, why would he not then pay everyone’s debt? Anyway, he would not be able to afford it, he added with a smack to the ear.

As Logan turned past the opposite side of the alley, she pulled him through it. Again, Logan had the feeling that something was not right. This alley should have not existed.

Suddenly, Logan found himself walking arm in arm with Alexandra through a market. The watch-mage now looked like herself, dressed in her lavender academy robes, her freckled face on the pretty side of plain. She picked up a bright shiny apple and polished it on her robes. From behind, Logan could hear the ruckus of stalls being roused by armored figures. Alexandra did not seem fazed.

"I did not tell you this earlier because I had not finished my research, and because I did not want to prejudice your view of Martin the Green before you met him. I wanted you to view his strength of character for yourself without preconceived notions." There was a soothing, almost motherly tone to her voice. A group of children came running by as the two of them walked past a stall selling straw jugs. The children were laughing, and Alexandra patted a few on the head affectionately. Logan noticed they were wearing clay masks that reminded him of the crude drawings of goblins down at Gobbos on the Water.⁷³

"As you may now know, Martin the Green is in possession of a tome called The Book of Black Circles. It would no exaggeration that it is perhaps one of the most dangerous magical items ever created. You must make sure that he remains on the path to destroy it. Its corruptive influence will not only try to undermine his morals, but the longer he owns it the closer he will come to becoming its master, Marchosias the Corruptor.⁷⁴ These Manticore Killers, or whatever they call themselves, are heading to one of the few places it might actually be destroyed, but you must make sure that when the time comes, he does it, no matter what it takes. Do you understand?"

She stopped and pulled Logan's arm to stop him as well. There were scores of people passing close by as they fled from the armored figures. He could see the tops of spears heading towards them.

"We will be sending a watch-mage to help deal with the situation as soon as we can, but there is a danger in that as well because of the temptation of power of the book. I am hoping that you are your father's son, and that you will do everything in your power to make sure he stays the course, and to ensure that such a man as Marchosias does not walk Aquerra again. And lest you be tempted to try and take the easy way, remember less reliable men than Martin might get their hands on it if he is killed, so only use that option as a very final choice."

She held Logan's face in her hands.

"Find someone in party you can trust to do what needs to be done in case you are unable to and make it someone who can keep it secret. Take your time and choose correctly. He cannot know."

And with that, Logan was bumped by the crowd, and he and Alexandra were separated. He could see her bite into the apple as she disappeared into the crowd. Logan turned to his right and there, now fanning out to surround him were a dozen or more Teamsburg town guard, armored in ring mail, and draped in black shadowy cloaks that seem to have faces super-imposed on them.

Before he could flee, Logan felt the shocking pain of spear driving deep into his side. He coughed up blood and all the guards started laughing. He turned to look at the guard that stabbed him and he had his father's face.

"You will remember what I have said when you awake," he said in Alexandra's voice, and with that Logan awoke to the voices of his companions discussing Kazrack's fate.

⁷³ Gobbos on the Water is a basement level tavern on the Teamsburg Waterfront. When the Black Navy blew up the wharf out front of it, the harbor rushed in. Those that were not crushed were drowned and/or burned to death.

⁷⁴ Marchosias the Corruptor was the most feared and hated necromancer-warlock of all time. A former Master of the Academy he was responsible for the Second Humano-Orc War, which was fought simultaneously in both Thracia and the Kingdom of Herman Land.

Tholem, the 4th of Keent – 565 H.E.

“How long are we gonna bleedin’ wait for ole Stumpy?” Gunthar asked, as he and Martin stood watch in the box-shaped canyon.

“He could be gone a week,” Martin replied.

“What!?”

“Dwarves are not known for their quickness to take action,” Martin explained.

“We could take another route,” Gunthar offered.

“And leave Kazrack behind?”

“He could be dead.”

“He walked into a dwarven stronghold, I doubt he is dead,” Martin sighed.

“If he’s not back in a week we’ll assume he’s dead,” Ratchis said, from his bedroll nearby. Dawn approached and the half-orc sat up and stretched before undertaking his morning prayers.

“And what do you think of that little man?” Gunthar asked Logan, noting he was awake now too.

“We’ve been walking for ages, I could use the rest,” Logan replied. The olive-skinned young man rubbed his face with a calloused hand and looked at Martin the Green for a long time.

Kazrack broke his fast with hard bread smeared with yak lard and covered in cold gray gravy from last night’s supper. Captain Adalar had come to get him, and they ate in a great eating hall which was filled with the cacophony of several score dwarves, most of them armored, eating and drinking.

“I have been thinking of your troubles with coming through the pass with your half-breed friend,” Adalar said. “And took the liberty of looking at some maps for you.”

“Mayhap I might get a copy of a map?” Kazrack asked.

Captain Adalar frowned. “It would not be in my jurisdiction to order such a thing even if there were time, but I discussed it with one of the captains of the scouts and before you leave, he will give you some advice about which way to go. He knows the area much better than I ever could just from simply looking at a map.”

“I thank you deeply, brother. Though any route we take will have to be discussed with my companions,” Kazrack replied.

“Of course, but...” Captain Adalar paused for a long time. “I do not want to speak out of turn, but perhaps it would be best if you broke off your companionship with the half-breed. I can respect the loyalty of friendship, but some things just aren’t natural.”

Kazrack made no reply.

Captain Adalar slurped up the rest of the bread and gravy. “And now I am to bring you back to General Aron-lar, so you may talk before you go on your way. I am to arrange for your travel, so I will see you again to wish you farewell.

Adalar brought Kazrack through the winding passages of the fortress' lowers levels and to the General's office once again. Aron-lar stroked the braids of his great beard, bearing an expressionless face as Kazrack entered.

"My regrets that I could not see you again last night, but there is much to be done before we can march, and we are still waiting on the reports of some of our scouts," the general said. "Now, what did you find out from the priest of the cat goddess?"

"Not much that was useful," Kazrack replied. "He gave me a story that is barely plausible, but I have no means to test his honor."

"Well, there is no outward evil in him, if that is what you mean. I had one of the rune-throwers ask the gods to reveal the nature of his soul," Aron-lar said. "But as for actual honor, he has none. He is a follower of that foul cat goddess, as if humans could be less trustworthy."

"Humans vary in honor and steadfastness," Kazrack said, frowning.

General Aron-lar harrumphed. "If you are so soft-hearted as to accept a companion of tainted blood and still cannot vouch for this human priest, I shall have to hold him indefinitely. "

"Can I take him with me?" Kazrack asked. "I will watch him and determine if he is a turncoat, and if he is, I shall deal justice to him myself. This I would swear by Krauchaar. I would avenge myself on such a man who would portray himself as friend and then betray me. I mean if he has not seen any crucial secrets..."

"We had a sack over his head when he was brought to his cell. He would have seen the citadel itself when the eagle brought him here, but he has no idea of our numbers and goal."

There was a long silence. General Aron-lar closed his eyes.

"You may take him with you. I do not want to have to deal with him," he finally said. "But I expect a full report as to his dispensation when we meet again. If we do not meet again in Gothanius or within these walls, I will expect you in Abarrane-Abaruch one day."

Kazrack bowed his head. "I have long hoped that when this is all done, I could visit the home of my teacher, Belear Gritchkar, and then of course the home of my own clan."

"You will leave immediately," General Aron-lar said. He put out his hand and they grasped wrists in farewell. "I shall have the Bastite brought up to the courtyard, and Captain Adalar has arranged for Captain Minol to bring you back to your companions."

Back in the courtyard, Kazrack saw more troops running through drills, and others caring for the great riding lizards. Captain Adalar was waiting for him.

"You know, the three fair-haired Tarnitch brothers are here," Captain Adalar said with a smile that shone with his pride. He pointed to two of the dwarves running the drills. "They have been given their own commands of foot units. The experience they gained with you in that foul Necropolis has lengthened their beards."⁷⁵

Golnar walked over, removing his helm and saluting Kazrack with a fist to the chest and then they grasped wrists. "I only have a moment Master Delver," he said. "But I wanted to greet you for myself and on behalf of my brothers. I hope we will meet as comrades on the field of battle once again and one day soon."

"Let us hope not too soon, or without need," Kazrack replied, grimly.

Golnar nodded and then returned to his unit.

⁷⁵ To have your beard lengthen (or thicken) is a dwarven expression meaning to fully come into the maturity of their adulthood.

Two armored dwarves led Roland into the courtyard. There was a black sack hanging loosely over his head, but his hands were not bound.

“Kazrack? Are you there?” the Bastite asked.

“Yes, Roland. We will be leaving here soon. I mean to bring you back to the others,” Kazrack replied.

“Oh, thank the goddess!”

“Better you should thank the generosity of General Aron-lar,” Kazrack said.

“Oh, yes, of course, him as well,” Roland replied not able to hide the sarcasm. “The gods know I have rarely been treated with such hospitality.”

“Enough! Quiet down before I change my mind and leave you here,” Kazrack said.

Two of the great riding lizards came up to them. Captain Adalar introduced Kazrack to Captain Minol. He was short, even for a dwarf, not as broad of chest and hips as most dwarves, and his black beard was coming in steel-gray, despite the tangles of black hair that stuck out from beneath his visored leather helm. He wore a chain shirt and black leather breeches reinforced with black metal greaves.

“Captain Minol and one of his cavalry soldiers will bring you back to the others,” Captain Adalar explained. “He is the best scout we have here. He will be able to give you advice of an alternate route to take from the canyon.”

Kazrack bowed. “I thank you for your aid and time, sir.” Roland began to bow as well, but his dwarven guards jerked back up before he had bent far.

“My pardons,” the human priest said in the dwarven tongue.

Minol nodded and grunted. He helped Kazrack onto the strange double saddle they used upon the great riding lizards. The lizard was nine feet long, and it turned its head and stuck out its tongue lazily. Minol strapped Kazrack’s legs in tightly.

He pointed to a loose end sticking out of a knot. “Don’t pull on that unless we are about to go tumbling over a cliff or are rolling over. It undoes the straps in one quick yank,” He explained. “And when I tell you to shift your weight left, right, forward, or back, please do it immediately. The ride is much smoother with two experienced riders, but we will do our best.”

Kazrack nodded. “Since I returned to Derome-Delem I have wanted nothing more than to ride one of these beasts.”

“Well, you’re wish is granted,” Minol grunted.

Roland was helped onto the back of the second lizard and awkwardly strapped in and given the same directions.

“Oh, this is going to be lovely,” Roland quipped as the lizard jerked into motion. Soon, the two great beasts were shooting out of the great gate and hurrying up a nearly sheer surface, and then scooting along horizontally on the side of the stone bridge to the other side of the gorge.

“You can take off the sack,” the dwarf on the same lizard as Roland told him, and the Bastite happily did so.

“Does it take long to learn to ride one?” Kazrack yelled to Minol.

“No talking,” Minol replied.

Up and down, and along the side of cliffs, and once fully upside down, the two lizards made their way to the canyon.

Ratchis, Gunthar and Logan stood and took a few steps back reaching for their weapons when the first great lizard was spotted coming over the cliff to their left.

Kazrack waved happily to his friends, but when Roland finally arrived, he hurried off the lizard's back and swore.

"Where in the hell did the poofter come from?" Gunthar asked, confused.

"Yes, that is a good question," Martin said.

"Why Nikar, of course," Roland quipped.

"We know that." Martin did not laugh.

"Yeah, we don't need to know that you crawled out of the crack between your momma's legs," Gunthar snarled.

"I found him among my kin," Kazrack said. "They had taken him prisoner. They released him into my custody, but I still do not trust him."

Roland shot a look at the dwarf and frowned, putting a hand on his hip.

"Kazrack, I already explained what I was doing there and why I left Nikar, but I will gladly do it again for everyone else's benefit," the Bastite said.

"Do it later," Captain Minol said. "I told Adalar I would help you choose a route, but I have to be getting back."

"Adalar? Captain Adalar?" Martin asked.

Kazrack nodded.

Captain Minol took the time to go over the party's maps with them and do his best to point out alternate routes to Greenreed Valley.

He explained of an underground stream in a tunnel under the wall of mountains that blocked the way east. They would be underground a day at most, though it would be several more days along narrow ravines. And he warned them of kobolds in those areas. After that they would have a choice.

They could pass through the southwestern tip of the forest called Dybbuk Akvram, or they could skirt the wood by turning south, but it would add nine days to their journey.⁷⁶ As it was, having to take this other pass at all (instead of the bridge by the fortress) was adding about six days to the journey to Greenreed Valley.

"The portion of the wood you would be passing through if you took the more direct route is called 'Ailat-Bekis'," ⁷⁷ Captain Minol said. "I would avoid it. Few that go in come out, and when they do, they are changed."

"We have to take the quicker way," Ratchis said.

"What is there in that wood that is dangerous?" Martin the Green asked.

"Eh, there was some great elven battle there long ago, against the black enemy," Minol said, shooting a look at Ratchis. "Ghosts and other unnatural things. We give it a wide berth."

"Thank you, Captain," Kazrack said to him after the taciturn dwarf had saddled back up. "I owe you a debt of gratitude."

⁷⁶ *'Dybbuk Akvram'* means 'place of the bruised spirit' is the dwarven name of what men call 'The Forest of the Blood Sap'. It is where the druids of the Circle of the Thorn reside. (See sessions #30 through 33)

⁷⁷ This roughly means, "turn away from what fascinates" in dwarven.

“May Hodonar guide your way,” Minol said, and he and his fellow rider took off over the cliff.

Logan was introduced to Roland, and then the Bastite retold his version of events since leaving Nikar.

The Keepers of the Gate broke camp and decided they would not make the choice about which route to take until they reached the point where they had to turn south or not.

“Does anyone mind if I run ahead?” Roland asked. “I can change to panther form and do the scouting.”

“No, you are staying with us,” Ratchis replied.

“I’ve explained already why I left Nikar how and when I did,” Roland said. “I have not betrayed your trust. This is all a misunderstanding.”

“I think either we have to trust him, or leave him behind, or kill him,” Logan offered. “It makes no sense to only trust him halfway.”

The others agreed. Roland transformed into his dusky great cat form and took off down the narrow pass to the east.

They traveled down along a dry riverbed that wedged the canyon wall in half. The walls on either side of them climbed as they marched deep into the next day, and soon they might as well have been in a cave, so little sunlight made it down to them.

The next evening brought the actual mouth of a cave where the trail tumbled into rocky darkness. Here the ravine was wider, where large stones carried by the long dry river had clogged the pass and made a natural dam. They were in a deep and wide eroded bowl, the perimeter of which was pockmarked with paths in all directions.

“We have to go in there?” Logan asked.

Ratchis nodded. “That’s what the dwarf said. It is supposed to be pretty straight and come out the other side of the range. It will save us three or four days if Martin’s estimate on the map is right.”

“If we save four days this way, will we avoid the haunted forest, or whatever it is, and take the southern route?” Logan asked.

“I think we should waste no time,” Ratchis said. “I am going to try to convince everyone that we can hurry through the forest.”

They spent the entirety of the next day underground. While there was only one basic way to go, it was a winding and often narrow path, with some precipitous drops that caused the llama to panic. Its cries echoed eerily. Several times, Ratchis found small dog-footed tracks down in the cave, but they saw no sign of the kobolds they thought must have made them. The moon was rising as they came out the other end of the underground passage damp and exhausted. A cold fog settled into the new ravine they now found themselves in. It was very narrow with natural shelves that ran along at different heights.

They made camp happy for what little sky was above them.

In the night, Martin and Logan woke the others during the second watch because they heard scrambling among the shelves and tiny caves above them.

Kazrack kicked Gunthar awake with the tip of his boot.

“What!?”

“Kobolds!” Kazrack hissed.

“You woke me for kobolds?” Gunthar said turning over and pulling his bedroll up. “What kind of wimp are you? There better be three hundred of them.”

Kazrack kicked him again and Gunthar spun around punching the dwarf’s chestplate. The sound of it rang loudly up the ravine and down into the cave the party had emerged from.

Tiny stones and puffs of dust came raining down from above, but though the party waited for nearly an hour, no kobolds ever came.

Anulem, the 7th of Keent - 565 H.E.

The morning found them bleary-eyed. As Martin changed to his winged reptilian form with an *Alter Self* spell and took off to get a better lay of the land, Gunthar let loose a long curse-laden muttering complaint about having been woken up as he brushed the llama.

The others said their prayers and broke camp.

Martin returned to report that he thought they might make it out of the far end of the ravine by the end of the day, and that he could see the forest beyond. Roland slunk off in panther form.

Dorn and Gunthar were falling behind by late that day, exhausted. Ratchis set an excruciating pace, and they ended the night with a steep climb on to a cliff overlooking the forest. From up there they could see a great mountain to the north on the left, and the forest stretching as far as could be seen to the south and east; the shadow of another ridge was very very distant. A river cut across the forest to the distant south. It would be here that the Keepers of the Gate would have to decide if they would cut through the forest due east or turn south to the river and avoid the so-called haunted woods.

“So which way do we go tomorrow?” asked Logan.

“It does us no go to go through the forest to save time if what is in there slows us even more, or even stops us,” Martin offered.

“I can throw the stones on the morrow and see what my gods offer,” Kazrack said.

The others agreed.

Ralem, the 8th of Keent – 565 H.E.

The sunlight rippled on the sea of green before them as they made their way down the cliff and into the woods early the next morning. The reply Kazrack read in the rune-carved stones he carried about his neck seemed very clear to him.

<Long path is certain, but late. Short path is treacherous, but timely. Either way you will find what you seek, but its state? Uncertain.>

The woods were lovely, but thick and the going was slow. Though only late summer, in this part of Derome-Delem some leaves already began to change into a shining golden brown. The peat blue autumn moss was covering stones and logs and even living trees. Every step was a crunch of twigs, leaves, and hummus.

Roland prowled around in panther-form. He had not changed back to human for several days and seemed to prefer it that way. Sometimes he would sit in front of someone and open and close his feline-jaws and make noises in the back of his throat, but he never spoke.

The party line stretched out as they marched. Ratchis way out in front with Logan, Kazrack walking alone humming a dwarven song, Martin, and Dorn even further back with nothing to say to each other, and finally, straggling behind, Gunthar was pulling along Fearless the llama.

Suddenly Logan dropped his sword and walked lazily over to a strange gray tree. It was very tall and had no branches except for a few near the top, and it was crenulated with white specks on its bark. He sat beneath it and promptly fell asleep.

“Logan!” Ratchis yelled. Dorn walked past him and curled up next to Logan.

And a few moments later, Gunthar stumbled over towards the tree. Kazrack made to grab him, but the Neergaardian swatted him away and fell over softly snoring, and then amazingly began to drag himself slowly towards it.

“What foul magic is this?” Kazrack asked. “I am glad I am dwarf and am immune to such arcane treachery.”

“It might be natural,” Martin suggested. “Some kind of pollen with a narcotic effect.”

“It is as good as magic,” Kazrack swore. “My brethren warned us this place was enchanted. Think of how many travelers go to sleep beneath those trees and never wake up.”

“Luckily, I don’t think many people pass through here, and we are not just any travelers,” Ratchis said. He walked over and grabbed Dorn and Logan and dragged them away from the tree. Kazrack did the same with Gunthar.

Gunthar was draped over his llama, and Ratchis carried Logan and Kazrack and Martin carried Dorn. They followed what looked like an overgrown woodcutter’s trail to a stream, and there splashed their sleeping companions in the face with water. They awoke with much confusion.

“Stay away from the gray trees,” Ratchis warned.

They marched on, deeper into the forest, and an hour or so later, they marched in the shadow of hill with a gentle slope that rose to the north. The hillside was wooded, but Ratchis noticed that there had been systematic logging in the area not all that long ago. Curious, he went off to scout ahead, and brought Logan with him, as the Hermanlander had expressed interest in learning more about tracking and survival.

They made their way up the slope. Hidden among the trees were three lodges, built partially into the ground. They were huge, and by the size of the windows and doors, Ratchis could immediately tell they were meant for people who were at least ten feet tall. He sent Logan to retrieve the others, while Gunthar and Dorn waited with the llama.

The lodges were well-constructed and made from logs, mud, and wooden pins, but they were abandoned. Ratchis could tell no one had been here for weeks, if not months. He stood in the doorway of one and looked in. There was no furniture, and only the remains of some soiled and stained rushes on the dirt floor.

“Ogres?” Kazrack asked as he came in, Logan and Martin in tow. Roland scurried in, nearly unseen, still in his housecat form.

“I don’t think so,” answered Ratchis. “Ogres generally don’t have the patience or craft to build lodges like these. Could be...”

“Giants,” Martin said for him.

“Oh, thank Krauchaar! He is answering my prayer for a chance to prove my skill at arms against the enemy of my people,” Kazrack said. “But what kind of giants live in wooden cabins in the forest?”

“Forest giants,” Martin and Ratchis said, at once and both immediately grinned.

“And,” Ratchis continued. “If we see giants we are fleeing if at all possible. Giants are fierce foes, and we cannot afford to be delayed by injuries, or to risk one of us might be killed.”

Logan gave Ratchis a strange look, and Kazrack frowned.

“Anyway, it seems that the giants are gone,” Ratchis added.

The half-orc went over and dug in some mounds in one corner, despite Logan’s protests, and within he found garbage and a broken wooden doll the size of small child.

“Whatever drove them away...” Martin began.

“We will flee from that, too,” Ratchis said. “Let’s move on.”

Less than twenty minutes later, they could hear what must have been a wider river ahead of them, so Martin transformed into this flying reptilian form and took off to get a better view of the landscape. As he passed the tree line, he heard something whiz past his head, and then felt something bounce against the thick hide of his form. It was tiny little arrows of a kind he had seen before. Martin made a quick revolution and saw the river about 500 yards ahead, and several miles ahead was black wooden tower of some kind atop a thickly wooded hill.

He came back reported what he saw.

“And there are pixies here,” Martin added.

“Pixies?” Logan asked.

“That explains the sleeping trees,” Kazrack said. “Rotten faerie magic.”

“Keep it down,” Ratchis said. “They might hear you and you know what they are like.”

“What are pixies like?” Logan asked, seeing the look of worry passing over the party’s faces.

Roland shrugged his panther shoulders.

“They shoot at you with arrows that put you to sleep, and they confuse you or enthrall you with lights,” Martin explained.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Logan replied.

“It is not just what they do, but when they do it,” Kazrack added.

“Like, while we are trying to cross the river,” Ratchis said.

“Shh! Don’t give them ideas,” Kazrack said.

“Oh, we already have a lot of ideas, Mr. Stone-head,” came a very high-pitched voice from up in the trees. Several other laughing voices joined it, and one tree limb shook, but there was nothing to be seen on it.

“We’ll head to the tower as landmark. I think that is due east, and that is the way we want to go,” Ratchis said.

“Oh yes! Oh yes! You should definitely go there!” cried one pixie voice.

“Oh, what fun! What fun that will be!” Tittered another, clapping his hands, as he appeared. There were three tiny men, no more than two and half feet tall, dressed in green knickers, cream-colored shirts, and suspenders. They had large membranous bee-like wings on their backs. They each had a tiny sword and a tiny bow, with a tiny quiver full of tiny arrows. One was redheaded and had a patch of hair on his chin; the other two had chestnut hair, though one wore a leather cap that was way too big for him.

“I guess we aren’t going to the tower, then...” Kazrack said.

“Oh, why not?” the redheaded pixie sounded upset. “But we want you to go! It will be ever so much fun to watch you play with the...”

Another of the pixies covered his companion’s mouth with a hand and whispered in his ear with the other. The two of them started to laugh shrilly and then they both whispered in the third’s ear at once and all three burst into laughter.

”Let’s keep moving,” Ratchis said, continuing to march. The pixies disappeared.

“I don’t like this,” Martin said nervously.

“Don’t worry, we’ll give them little man to play with,” Gunthar said, gesturing at Logan. “He’s nearly their size, he can fight them for us.”

Logan gritted his teeth, and his knuckles turned white on the pommel of his sword.

At the river, Roland growled, annoyed with its width and the strength of its current. He leapt at Martin, the black sinewy muscles of his panther-form shriveling, and the hair folded back and springing outward again, a variety of patchwork colors. In less than a moment, Roland was a calico cat purring in the watch-mage’s arms.

Thomas was petrified with fear and took off down the back of Martin’s robes and scooted onto Ratchis’ head, chittering angrily.

“I hate cats!” he swore.

“Relax,” Martin told him, and placed Roland’s kitty form atop Fearless. Thomas came bounding back to his master, and Martin scratched his head.

“Gimme a nut!” Thomas demanded, and Martin obliged him.

The ringing of laughter came from above them again, and once again the pixies appeared, though one of the chestnut-haired ones was gone. The one with the too-big hat was still there, though.

“Hey, can we ask you something?” the redheaded one asked.

“It seems like you already did,” Martin replied.

The pixie put his hands on his hips and scrunched up his face.

“Haven’t we met some of you before?” the pixie asked.

“Um... maybe, we have been once visited the Circle of the Thorn, and...” Martin began.

“That’s it!” the pixies snapped his fingers, but his joy at having remembered fled his expression quickly. “You are friends with the kinslayer!”

“Oh, we don’t like him,” the other pixie said. “He killed Cerwidgen.”

“Where is he?” the first pixie demanded.

“Our destinies parted many months ago,” Ratchis said.⁷⁸ “And anyway, he has paid for his crime by the customs of your people and still deals with that burden.”⁷⁹

“Hmmm, that’s true!” the pixie said. “A life for a life, that’s the rule!”

“Who else lives in these woods?” Martin asked.

“Oh, lots of things,” said the redheaded pixie.

“The dead things and the elf-witch lady,” the other said, and the first turned and smacked him upside the head.

“Shut up! It is more fun if they find out themselves,” the first one said. They both disappeared again.

Martin flew across the river with a rope before his spell could expire, and Ratchis held it on the other side as the watch-mage tied it tightly about a tree. Dorn began to make his way across, holding on to the rope while more than waist deep in the strong current.

Logan was pushing at a tree with rotten roots that was right on the riverbank and finally managed to knock it over. It reached three-quarters of the way across the river, and he began to walk carefully along it, displaying excellent balance.

Suddenly, Dorn moaned and fell over, letting go of the rope. His inert body was tumbled by the water and began to be dragged along down river.

“Grab the rope!” Ratchis yelled and dived into the water after his friend.

The others heard gentle tittering, and one of the pixies appeared with a tiny bow in hand and began to fire at Logan.

“Stop that!” Kazrack commanded, as he held the rope that Ratchis dropped. “Gunthar grab the rope.” He let go as well and fetched his fiddle and bow from where it was carefully padded in his pack and began to play it.

The other pixie appeared, and both gawked at dwarf. Logan made it across, and Ratchis had managed to drag Dorn to safety on the other side. He was awake again but sputtering confusedly.

The two pixies swung around arm in arm up in a tree, dancing a jig to the dwarf’s music, and making up rude lyrics to go along with it. Gunthar tied his end of a rope around a tree and led the llama into the river, murmuring in soothing tones to keep it calm. Roland rode atop the beast in his tiny cat form.

Kazrack put his fiddle away, and suddenly a rain of tiny arrows fell around him. He shrugged them off and cutting the rope free on his side, wrapped it around his left arm and began to walk across using the tree.

“That’s no fair!” cried the redheaded pixie.

“Now we’re not going to tell you about the witch-lady and her black beast!” said the other, and they both disappeared.

“See ya later! We’re off to let everyone know you’re coming,” the voices came from nothingness, and then they were gone.

“We’ve faced some pretty horrific creatures, haven’t we?” Kazrack asked Ratchis.

⁷⁸ Actually, exactly two months ago to the day!

⁷⁹ Beorth was afflicted with the curse of losing his memory back in Session #33.

“Yes,” the half-orc replied, wringing out his clothing.

“I think I fear the pixies more than any of them,” the dwarf said solemnly.

And onward they marched, using the tower when it came into view as a landmark to make their way east-by-southeast, but hoping to avoid it as well.

Logan continued to walk up front with Ratchis, and soon they were far ahead and just out of sight of the others.

“I wanted to talk to you while we were alone,” Logan said to the half-orc.

Ratchis stopped and looked at his new companion suspiciously.

“I received a message from Alexandra the Lavender in the form a dream,” Logan continued. “It was about Martin.”

“Are you sure it was a message and not just a dream?” Ratchis asked, continuing to walk.

“I am certain,” Logan replied. He went on to explain about how the Book of Black Circles held a portion of Marchosias’ soul, and as Martin succumbed to its evil, he would be more than corrupted, he would be devoured and become the Corrupter himself, so that the vilest of wizards ever known to have lived might walk Aquerra again. “Alexandra said I am to make sure he stays on the path to destroy it, but she also implied he might have to be killed if it looks like he about to be taken over.”

Ratchis was silent for a long time.

Logan continued, “She said I should pick someone to help me do it in case I should fail, but that it should be a secret so that he could not find out and prepare against it. You seemed the best choice.”

Ratchis nodded, and then called for Dorn to join them up front.

“Dorn, I want to ask you a favor,” Ratchis said to him.

“Anything,” Dorn replied.

“I need you...” Ratchis stopped, and then crouched, looking under some brush. “Roland? Do you mind giving us a moment of privacy and not sneak around behind us?”

The tiny figure of calico cat scurried back to the others.

“I need you to watch Martin,” Ratchis continued. “Stay close to him no matter what, but especially during combat. Let no one come near him and let no one take the book from him, and if it looks like he be overcome by its evil... well...”

Dorn nodded, solemnly. “I understand.”

When Dorn had left to rejoin the others, Logan stared at Ratchis with astonishment.

“I said it should be a secret,” Logan said.

“No, you said, Alexandra said it should be a secret,” Ratchis said. “And it still is a secret, but we needed another set of eyes. You and I will be deeply involved in combat more often,” Ratchis explained. “Dorn hangs back and observes and lends support when he sees it is needed. He is the good choice.”

Logan nodded, but still seemed unsure.

And on they went through the woods, and not long after Ratchis put up a hand.

"I hear voices ahead," the half-orc said. "I will creep up to see who or what it is, you go back and tell the others to be quiet, and I'll come back to you."

Logan nodded and Ratchis was off.

Ratchis crept through the brush keeping his ears open and his head down. In clearing up ahead were two men just over six feet tall, broad of chest and shoulder. They wore no armor, but utilitarian clothing of green, brown, and gray wool. They had greatswords on their backs, and he could see long bows and quivers leaning against a tree. They had long curly locks of auburn hair, but round fresh faces with ruddy cheeks. They were picking large ripe green melons from a patch beneath two oaks. One smashed the other in the chest with an overripe melon and started to laugh a deep rich laugh and the other looked angry.

Ratchis crept back to his companions and reported what he saw.

"If they are six feet tall and acting that way, they could be giant children... or adolescents," Kazrack said. "We should go kill them."

Ratchis frowned and Gunthar laughed.

"Our mission is not killing random giant children," Roland said, transforming back into human form for the first time in days.

"And not all giants are evil," Ratchis offered.

Kazrack harrumphed.

"The question is, do we try to talk to them and see if they can help us on our way, or avoid them," Ratchis added. "What do you think, Martin?"

Martin the Green scratched Thomas' chin as he thought. "They are more likely to hinder than help us, I think."

Logan and Roland agreed.

"Anyway, they might not be giant children, they just might be playful woodsmen," Martin said.

"Well, then we should investigate," Kazrack said.

"Yeah, investigate their internal organs, you mean," Logan said, with a smirk.

"Well, if it comes to that..."

"We could talk to them for you," came a high voice from up in the trees.

"Oh, no!" Ratchis moaned. "This way, double time!" He began to set a hurried pace further south away from where he has seen the two tall strangers. The others followed.

They had barely made it a hundred yards, when the two men came bounding out of the woods on an intercept course.

"Look an orc!" cried one of them in a baritone voice. He had a bow in one hand, and a melon palmed in the other.

"Let's smash him!" The other said and threw a melon that smashed against the back of Ratchis' head with a juicy pop.

End of Session #76

Session #77

"I am only *half-orc*!" Ratchis called to the tall ruddy-faced men, as he and the others slowed and took cover, knowing that they could not outrun them with the llama and Kazrack.

"We're tired of evil things messing up our forest, orc!" cried the man who had thrown the melon. There was something in both their voices that belied their height and broad shoulders, something that made them seem much younger than they might initially appear.⁸⁰

"Yeah! Go back to your evil elf lady! We don't want you around here!" the other added.

Logan was crouched behind a tree and Roland took his lead. Ratchis stopped and faced them from about sixty feet away.

"Ratchis! What are you doing?" Roland asked. Martin drew Fearless the llama deeper into the brush and away from the partial clearing where the confrontation was happening, as Kazrack moved behind a tree himself, his hands tight around the haft of his halberd.

"Why don't you come and fight like real men? Pansy melon-throwers!" Gunthar jeered from his place beside Ratchis, both swords drawn.

He was answered with a melon that smashed painfully against his chest and neck.

Logan laughed.

"I thought we were trying to avoid fighting...?" Dorn looked back and forth to each member of the party, and then began to load his crossbow.

"We know nothing of evil ladies," Logan called from behind a tree. "We are just trying to pass through this forest, you bloody fools!"

"We do not want to fight," Ratchis added. "We know nothing of this elf woman, and we are not evil. It is as my companion says, we are just passing through."

"Well, the pixies did mention an evil elf," Kazrack called out, honest to the last. "But let me ask you this: Are you giants?"

"Yes!" cried the first giant youth. "I am Smeaghele of the Fir Bolg Clan! And we are tired of outsiders coming into our lands and forcing us to move and trying to change our ways."

"We just want to get out of your forest. We do not want to change your ways," Martin piped up from in the brush.

"I am called Deaghele, and you must come with us to face the judgment of our chieftain and father, Hognir."

"You're not taking us anywhere," Gunthar spat. "You wouldn't be the first giants I cut down to size. Come on, Kazrack." He took a step forward and readied himself to charge when the dwarf did so.

"We want to be out of your forest as much as you want us gone," Logan said. "The best thing you can do is show us the way out."

"Their father may show us the way out," Ratchis suggested.

"We are to trust giants?!!" It was Kazrack's turn to spit.

⁸⁰ **DM's Note:** This adventure was adapted from "Things That Go Bump In The Night" by Rich Stump, from *Dungeon* magazine #38.

“They are giants, and I am an orc,” Ratchis turned to his dwarven companion. “Which of us do you want to attack first?”

“Fine!” Kazrack snarled and turned back to face the young giants. “You are but children, be off with you before we spank your bottoms and make you run along.”

“You must come before Chief Hognir,” Deaghele said. “Now put away your weapons and come along.”

“Oh, great queen Bast, though who art as nimble as though art powerful, allow me to see inside the hearts of these mortals so I may see their intentions towards us,” Roland chanted softly, rubbing the golden cat’s eye engraved with an ankh around his neck.

“What direction is your tribe?” asked Ratchis.

“Towards the old fort of your kin,” Deaghele replied.

“I sense no evil in these young giants,” the Bastite called to his companions. “But I’d still rather not see their father. I have no desire to be surrounded by giants.”

“I said, move along you giantish runts,” Kazrack barked. “I will stay my hand from caving in your skulls since you are not as disgustingly evil as most of your kin.”

“Kazrack, they hold us no malice,” Martin said in soothing tones and coming out from the brush, but leaving the llama behind, he turned to the giants. “But... no offense, we would rather go our own way.”

“If you will not come then we must go and tell our kin,” said Smeaghele. “And you may not like it when our rangers find you.”

“Go off to your evil dark elfin mistress,” Deaghele said, as they both turned to move off. “She will not save you.” And with that they took off through the trees with a speed that belied their size.

“Yeah, get out of here!” Logan called after them. “Next time we might not be so nice.”

“It boils my blood that giants would accuse me, a dwarf, of being in league with evil,” Kazrack said, combing his beard with his fingers.

Ratchis nodded. “It seems no where am I safe from the prejudice of others.”

“Gods preserve me!” Logan laughed in disbelief. “A hulking half-orc and a dwarven warrior with hurt feelings, now I have seen everything.”

Ratchis snarled. “Come on, let’s get out of here before they return with others.”

The Keepers of the Gate continued their eastward hustle. The woods were not as thick here as they rounded the hill and then took off southward, following Ratchis’ lead. Kazrack and Martin the Green began to fall behind, and though sure-footed, Fearless the Llama could not gain much speed either.

They had not gone more than another mile or so, and the day’s light was growing long, when they saw a great mound where no trees or plants grew surrounded by over a score of the gray trees they had seen before. The party moved to circumvent the area when shapes began to erupt from the earthen mound.

The dirt-encrusted corpses of a score of black orcs with chitinous hides crawled out the ground, old spears, and axes in hands. They moved with great speed, hunched over and snorting.

“Fresh flesh,” one of them hissed in the language of orcs. He wore a rotting headdress of bones and feathers and stood nearly seven feet tall, wielding a rusted great sword in his hands, a large notch cut from it. Unlike the others, he was a high orc.⁸¹

“Hurry past them! Double-time!” Ratchis cried to his companions still running, but soon he realized that the undead orcs would cut the line of adventurers in half and separate them into two groups, so he stopped and doubled back.

“Come join us in the eternal war, brother!” cried the largest orc.

“Destroy them!” cried a high-pitched mellifluous voice, as a slight figure came tumbling out of the brush from the south, long sword in hand. She had very light brown willowy hair, almost the color of straw, pale skin, delicate features, with the slightest upturn of her tiny nose, and large sparking green eyes. Her ears looked even pointier than those of other elves the party had met, and her face was nearly expressionless, except for the slightest hint of a smirk. She wore leather armor, and a bluish-purple cloak with red trim, torn in one place and travel-stained.

“Anarié!” cried Martin the Green.

“She must be possessed by a witch!” Ratchis called to his friends, worried her command had been to the undead and not to her former companions. “Don’t hurt her. Stay together! Destroy the undead!”

The undead orcs came bursting through the trees as Dorn got down on his hands and knees and began to crawl towards one of the trees to fall asleep. Logan fought off a wave of drowsiness and drew his long sword, moving to cut off the orcs’ approach to Martin. The watch-mage led the frightened and spitting llama away from the attackers.

“Rivkanal, fill me with your holy might and send these undead foes back to their graves so they may rot in their hells as they deserve,” Kazrack cried to his gods, grasping the pouch of runestones about his neck, but he could feel something about this unholy site resisted the power of his gods.

“Bah! We’ll chop these things down in a second! Out of my way, Stumpy!” Gunthar flew into the melee, both blades whirling and humming as he hacked at the first undead orc he met. In a moment, he was happily creeping towards the next one.

“Death the world over! Death the world over!” several of the black orcs croaked in their language.

The tallest orc came charging at Ratchis with its great sword over its head, but at the last moment it clawed at the half-orc with cold black talons. Ratchis felt an eerily familiar coldness wash over him, but he shook it off.

“Beware, this is a wight!” Ratchis warned the others, swinging his own great sword to keep the creature at bay.

Stepping back, Ratchis called to his goddess to increase his strength, and Kazrack followed suit.

“Bah! You are still weak in Ashronk’s eye!” the wight said, swinging its sword downward. Ratchis was barely able to parry the blow, and felt the shock run up his arm to his neck and shoulder with sharp needles of pain.

“I shall cleave your head off and dedicate it to Krauchaar!” Kazrack roared, taking the top of one’s skull right off, but it did not fall.

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted, but the spell had no effect.

“Great Cat Queen! These abominations show great strength, please help me to show them your own,” Roland cried, clasping a hand to his holy symbol, and a wave of holy energy burst out from a spot twenty feet ahead of him, smiting the orcish undead. Several fell, their animated force snuffed out, but Logan cried out in pain as well, as he instinctively tried to roll away from the spell’s effect, but he could not evade it completely.

⁸¹ High orcs and black orcs not known to work together unless both are being led by some third greater power, such as in the times of the Humano-Orc Wars.

“That hurt!” he complained, chopping open the chest of an orc, and then finishing it with another blow to the back of the head as it stumbled.

Gunthar laughed at the Herman-Lander, as he cut down yet another undead orc, moving through them like a scythe through the wheat, if wheat erupted into black ichor when it was cut.

Kazrack hurried over to aid Ratchis as soon as he cut down the ghoul before him. The undead orc chieftain was distracted, and the half-orc was able to cut deep into its thigh causing its defense to drop. Kazrack’s halberd blade slid into its lower back and was jerked back out bringing a chunk of black and rotted kidney with it.

“You will join our ancestors in hell!” Ratchis roared and drove the point of his sword into the wight’s neck, twisting. The thing fell over, unmoving.

Anarié tumbled around one of the undead orcs that finally made it to her and cut its leg out from under it.

Logan and Gunthar argued as they herded three of the ghouls between them, driving them back and forth with blows from their swords, and making their way towards each other with anger. When the last orc fell, they stood facing each other and breathing hard, swords still raised as if ready to strike.

“Fortune smiles upon us that you would come this way,” Anarié said to her former companions. She sheathed her sword, and placed a hand on her hip, flashing one of her rare smiles. “Perhaps you can accomplish what the giants were unwilling to do.”

Martin walked over and stepped between Logan and Gunthar and the two warriors put their weapons away.

“And what is that?” Ratchis asked Anarié. He did not put his sword away.

“Cleanse this forest of the evil within it,” Anarié said. “The real evil, that is...”

“And what are you doing here?” Kazrack said, taking a place beside Ratchis, and still clutching his weapon as well.

Anarié’s face remained impassive, but her green eyes shone as they moved from one weapon and then the other.

“Business,” she replied. “Things that elves need take care of. I originally came here seeking out Aríon, who came here seeking Tirhas.”

“Nephthys! Please show me the intentions of our former companion so that we may choose freely with full knowledge of our circumstances,” Ratchis prayed openly to his goddess to detect evil.

The corner of Anarié’s mouth twitched into a momentary smirk.

“I am sorry, but many things have happened since you were gone and we cannot be too cautious,” the half-orc said in his rasping voice.

Anarié nodded. They now noticed she carried several wounds, so Ratchis healed her with his goddess’ power.

“We return to Greenreed Valley to seek the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze,” Kazrack said. “We do not have time to wander about this forest after the witch, but we still intend to help with that endeavor when times allows.”

Anarié shook her head. “Best leave the witches to my kin who are best prepared to handle the situation. Soon, we will be traveling into the Plutonic Realms to investigate the plans of our evil brethren.”

“So, what is this real evil you spoke of?” the dwarf asked.

“The undead spirits of orcs haunt portions of this forest from a war long ago during the Second Great Wandering of Elves,” Anarié explained.⁸² “But they are ruled by the undead spirit of an elf, she must be destroyed.”

“So that is the evil elf lady the pixies mentioned?” Martin the Green asked walking over. He and Logan had found a bag of old coins at the base of one of the trees when they pulled Dorn away from it, and he handed it to Ratchis.

Anarié paused. “Yes.”

Martin’s brow furrowed.

“And who is this?” Anarié asked, as Roland walked over, and Logan joined them as well. Introductions were made, but Logan only grunted his hello, taking the bag back from Ratchis and up-ending it to count through what it held. There were many old silver dwarven obleks and a few Tempestras silver-leaves.⁸³

As the money was divided, Anarié warned them of some of the features of the forest.

“Avoid the swamp directly east of here,” she said. “The lights there draw mortals to their deaths.”

“How shall we know when we approach this evil place?” Kazrack asked.

“It will be swampy,” Anarié said, with no hint of humor.

“How fares Aze Nuquerna?” asked Martin.

“Last time I was there Ethiel and the others were much concern over the rate of growth of the area of steam in Greenreed Valley. It had gotten so it could be seen for miles, reaching into the sky, and was widening on a daily basis,” she replied.

“We’re not going there are we?” Logan asked.

“Stupid! Of course, we’re going there,” Gunthar replied. “Unless you might wet yourself...”

“We are sorry we cannot give you aid now, but you know how important it is that we reach the valley in time and deal with this threat,” Ratchis said to the elf. “But perhaps we can escort your part of the way to where you need to go?”

“You need not worry. We all have our roles to play,” Anarié said. “And I must be off to see to my own, but as my people say, ‘A star shines brightly on the hour of our meeting’ I take it as a good sign of our successes to come.”

“One last thing,” Martin asked. “Where is the Right Blade of Arofel?” The mage had noticed the blade was not at her side.⁸⁴

“Oh! I returned it to Ethiel to be placed in the vaults of Aze Nuquerna until such time it might be granted as a gift again, or some heir of Arofel or Jeremy come to claim it.”

Martin’s eyes narrowed. Something was not right about that answer.

“That would be me!” Gunthar said. “We have to go get it!”

⁸² The Second Great Wandering of Elves is said to have begun in the Year 286 of the Third Age, about 1700 years before present time.

⁸³ Tempestras’ money is created through a mysterious process where leaves are dipped in the molten metal, and as they disintegrate the metal takes the leaf’s shape. The money is highly valuable in most places in central Aquerra.

⁸⁴ The Right Blade of Arofel was given as a gift from the elves of Aze Nuquerna to Jeremy Northrop, and upon his death it was given to Derek Jamison to hold. Not long after young Derek was killed, the party gave the sword to Anarié.

“After this is all done,” Ratchis said. “You can go wherever you want.”

“I can go wherever I want now.”

“Then go, who’s stopping you?” Logan snapped.

“What? And miss Ratchis having to wipe your ass and powder your bottom when we come across something worth fighting and you soil yourself while hiding behind a tree?” Gunthar said.

Logan’s hand went to the hilt of his sword.

“Enough! Let’s go!” Ratchis said.

They wished Anarié luck in her endeavors, and soon made their way through the forest again, turning north this time to avoid the swamp, and in a hope that the change in direction might throw off whatever giants might be tracking them. Roland transformed back into panther form and took the rear of the line.

Martin the Green left the care of the llama to Gunthar and walked to the front to talk with Ratchis. Sweat poured off the half-orc’s ridged brow with each great step he took, his head constantly turning from side to side to pick out the best path and to stay alert for any approaching dangers.

“Anarié was hiding something,” Martin said to his companion.

Ratchis grunted.

“Both when I asked her about the elf witch and about the Right the Blade of Arofel, she seemed to hesitate as if she were picking her words carefully,” the watch-mage added.

“I detected no evil,” Ratchis replied. “And she never was one to talk much...”

“That might not mean anything,” Martin said. “She might not have intended evil to us, but still be possessed by one of the drow witches. Remember, Tirhas traveled with us while possessed and helped us quite a bit.”⁸⁵

“Perhaps I should have checked for charm,” Ratchis said. “But even if she is possessed, we cannot afford to be pulled off track now. Autumn approaches, and we must be on that ridge when it arrives.”⁸⁶

“We would abandon a friend to such a fate?” Martin asked in disbelief.

Ratchis shrugged his shoulders and grunted once again. Martin called back for Kazrack to join them, and the half-orc sighed and slowed his pace.

They argued for a time, but in the end, Kazrack agreed with Ratchis, the Keepers of the Gate had to press on. One day they would return to do their best to set to right all they had had to pass over.

Martin noticed that Logan had been hanging back but had been in earshot the whole time.

Darkness crept over the forest from the east, and soon, Ratchis was looking for a good place to make camp, but before he could he was interrupted.

Roland came running up in panther form, whining and growling and throwing his head back towards the rear of the line. They could now all hear something large smashing through the undergrowth, and in the dying light there appeared a giant of a man. He was just over ten feet tall and wore studded leather armor. A huge bastard sword was

⁸⁵ In the Honeycombe (see sessions #23 & 24)

⁸⁶The party learned this in the map room beneath the Pit of Bones (see Session #63).

strapped to his back, and a large javelin in his hand. He had long red hair, braided in one great knot running down his back, and well-kept beard.

“Run!” cried Ratchis, turning to lead the way, but Kazrack turned around and brought his halberd before him, readying.

“Form a line!” the dwarf cried to his companions. “We cannot outrun this foe!”

“Can we hide?” Logan asked. Gunthar snickered, drawing his two swords, and standing beside Kazrack.

“It is too late, but find cover,” Kazrack replied.

Ratchis growled and stopped, pulling his own sword reluctantly.

“Kazrack is right!” Martin said, still moving to get behind Ratchis.

“Interlopers! Begone!” the giant boomed. “You will not further desecrate this forest!”

“If you want us gone why do you keep trying to keep us from leaving?” Logan yelled back. He noticed a second giant with a long bow further back, crouched beside an ash tree.

“We only seek to leave this forest as quickly as we can!” Martin called to the giant.

“Trust me, you foul creature! At any other time, I would like nothing better than to knock your kneecaps off, but for now we must leave,” Kazrack’s hatred and anger bubbled in the spit at the corners of his mouth.

“We only want to go,” Ratchis re-iterated.

“Heh! We know you were negotiating with the witch’s elfin minion!” the giant replied.

“We seek no quarrel with you or your kin,” Martin the Green said, coming forward with both hands raised in the air. Dorn followed not too far behind him, loaded crossbow in hand and sweat dripping down his face. “And we seek no challenge against your rule here. We have only stopped when attacked or harassed by the fey, but we only seek to continue on and out of the forest to the east. Let us pass and we will not trouble you or your kind; that we do swear.”

The giant was silent for a time, and when he spoke again, he did not yell, though it was clear from his clenched jaw and fiery eyes that his anger had not abated.

“Fine, mage,” he said. “You may go on, but if you tarry again you shall face our wrath. The drow shall face it soon enough.”

“Tell us of this drow...” Kazrack began, but the giant scowled, and Martin turned on the dwarf.

“We have no time to chat, we must be on our way,” he turned back to the giant. “We hope not to trouble you again.”

“You had better do more than hope,” the giant replied. “Know that you shall be watched.”

The giant walked calmly towards his brethren and then both melted into the shadows. The last lights of day died beyond the tree behind them.

“We need to keep moving now,” Ratchis said when the giants were gone.

“We’ve been marching all day,” Logan complained. “How can we even be sure we’ll get out of this wood any time soon? And then, when the giants fall upon us, we’ll be exhausted. Better we find a secluded place to camp, rest up and if the giants come upon us tomorrow, we’ll be better prepared to fight them.”

“Aw! Ickle wickle little man’s feetses hurts him!” Gunthar mocked.

Kazrack suggested Martin levitate up and check how far it was before there was too little light. The watch-mage agreed, but he soon returned shaking his head.

“It is too dark already,” Martin reported. “I can see another river, perhaps three or four leagues away, and that may be edge of the forest, but I cannot tell. There was also some kind of cleft or ravine in a barren hill, maybe two leagues northeast of here, that may provide shelter...”

The watch-mage shrugged his shoulders, and a light rain began to fall.

“We should keep going and try our best to get as far as we can from the giants, the orc fort, the undead and anything else that might delay us,” said Ratchis.

“I agree,” Martin said. “Or at the very least make for the ravine. It may not be part of the giants’ territory and it may be defensible if it is and they come for us... if not we can rest.”

“I still think we should stay,” Logan said. “It is a common enough tactic to allow your foe to tire himself out. The giants could be doing just that.”

“I take them at their word and would rather not fight them,” said Ratchis.

“I would never trust a giant’s word,” Kazrack grumbled. “I, too, think we should stay, or at the very least make for the ravine. Marching onward through the night seems like a fool’s choice.”

“Are you saying I am a fool?” Ratchis growled.

“No, D’nar,” Kazrack replied, abashed. “But you do not know the tales of the craftiness and evil of giant-kind that are told by my people. If you did, you might choose differently.”

“Are they anything like the tales told of my kin?” Ratchis asked.

“You are an exception,” Kazrack said. “And you cannot say that any orc we have met on our journeys have not reinforced that.”

It was Ratchis’ turn to grumble.

“And you Roland?” Martin turned to the panther. “Do you want to stay?”

The panther bobbed its head up and down, but then growled and stalked over towards the northeast and jerked its head in that direction.

“I think he wants to either stay or make for the ravine,” Martin said. The panther bobbed its head again.

“The pussy is right,” Gunthar said. “If we are going to have to fight them anyway, I say we stay here, but if we have to go, let’s go to the ravine, or else little man might cry if he has to walk all night.”

Logan’s eyes narrowed.

“Fine, let us make for the ravine, then,” said Kazrack, looking to Ratchis. “It is a reasonable compromise, and we can make the distance in two hours.”

Two hours became nearly four in the darkness of the cold rainy night through the tangled roots and many bushes of the old forest.

The ravine was more of a huge barren cleft in a grassy hill. Rains slid down in great torrents on one side, echoing against the opposite wall and making muddy puddles in the floor. Twisted gray vines lined the ravine's walls, and a jumble of roots atop a rocky outcropping made a natural shelter large enough for most of the group and the llama as long as two stood outside on watch.

However, before making camp the others grumbled in the constant rain as Ratchis hurried about searching for tracks and looking down the narrow crack that ran down the rear wall.

The half-orc returned shaking his head.

"The ground here looks swept or combed," he said. "Like someone covered tracks, or perhaps this is the entrance to something's home, and they keep it clean. There are no bird's nests and no droppings or bones around. We can't stay here."

Logan groaned.

"This place looks perfectly natural to me," Martin replied, his long brown hair plastered to his face, his eyes were sunken and dark rings had begun to settle about them over the last few days. The light of one of the medallions Kazrack had made cast long shadows in the gloom.

"If something dangerous lives here as I suspect and the giants come, we will be doubly endangered," Ratchis replied.

"Maybe if something dangerous lives here the giants won't come," Logan speculated.

"That doesn't seem like a good argument for staying, if whatever is here frightens giants, we had best be scared of it too," Ratchis said.

"Maaaaw," said Fearless and shook his soaked coat.

"Meowrrr," Roland cried angrily, and his form shifted to that of a tiny cat again, and he leapt under the blankets rolled up atop the llama's back.

"Face it, Little Man, it is Snuffles' way or no way," Gunthar said, wagging his eyebrows, as he patted the llama's neck to keep it calm. "He loves to tell people what to do. You're lucky he isn't like most pig-fuckers or else you'd be taking the place of his woman every night."

"Kind of like how you use that llama to take the place of your woman?" Logan sneered.

"Well, if it was between the llama and your momma for a girlfriend, I'd be hard-pressed to choose, I mean the llama is hairier, but at least it doesn't smell half as bad as your rotten momma does," Gunthar replied calmly. "Probably a better lay than your momma, too. Then again, whores get lots of practice."

Logan sprang at Gunthar, his long sword suddenly in hand. The Neergaardian was barely able to leap back in time to save himself. As it was, the blade hacked his knee, and Gunthar stumbled backwards and onto the ground.

Fearless let out a frightened "Maaaaaaw!"

Gunthar climbed to his feet and drew his own sword, as Logan was upon him again. His face was pale with sweat, and blood was still running down his calf. He hobbled back and the two blades rang. Gunthar's defense was barely adequate, and he was beaten back before he could get a good footing, his face an ugly grimace of pain as he forced his injured leg to hold him up.

"Enough!" Ratchis roared, leaping between them. Kazrack pulled Gunthar away.

“Come on! Let me give it to him like I gave it to his momma,” Gunthar yelled. “I promise it will only be half as bloody!”

“We should have let him kill you,” Kazrack swore.

“Nice, Stumpy,” Gunthar said, grimacing. He dropped back to the ground and ripped open his pants leg to clean out the nasty wound Logan has dealt him. “I guess little men have to stick together.”

“I told you not to mention my mother again,” Logan said, his expression cold as ice.

“Oh, shut up, ya little ninny,” Gunthar said. “You are lucky they broke it up because I would have killed you. Don’t think this is done. I don’t friggin’ take someone trying to kill me lightly. I will put you in the ground!”

Logan tensed again.

“I said, enough!” Ratchis roared again. “When this is all done you can have at it with swords as much as you like, but until then stay away from one another.”

“He just tried to kill one of your companions and that’s the best you have to offer?” Gunthar complained. “And you call yourselves virtuous men? Virtuous pig-fuckers? You are the worst kind of hypocrites!” The Neergaardian stood and Kazrack healed him.

“If what you said is true, I would not have healed you,” Kazrack said. “But Rivkanal teaches compassion.”

“Whatever you need to believe to feel better about yourself, Stumpy,” Gunthar stood, and picking up his sword, sheathed it. He threw Logan a look that might have killed.

Roland let out an amused mew, while Dorn and Martin stood watching the exchange in shock.

“Logan,” Kazrack said, drawing the Herman-lander away. “If you cannot hold your steel you will have to leave. I want to teach him a lesson as much as you do, but our quest is too important. Kill him later if you must.”

“Perhaps I will leave and rejoin you later,” Logan replied, quietly.

“I wish you would stay,” Kazrack said. “As I said, you can kill him when we are done. It will be all the sweeter for withholding it for so long.”

“I’ll think on it.”

“I’ve often wanted to kill him, too,” Kazrack offered.

“Then why not?”

“We need his sword, and yours as well,” Kazrack said. “Our mission is greater than any of our desires. I want to find a wife, raise a family, forge swords...” The dwarf looked off into the darkness wistfully.

“What? No axes?” Logan said, finally smiling.

“Well, axes, too...”

“I was about to say that would be undwarfly of you.”

“You would not be the first to say so.”

“As if it were so bad if your momma was a whore,” Gunthar grumbled, hobbling along as the Keepers of the Gate continued their forced march through the night a few minutes later. “After my dad stopped sending money, me own Ma took eight or twelve cocks a night and was well-paid for it.”

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Morning found them encumbered by sleeplessness. Step after step they plodded on and twice Ratchis had to double back to whisper in the llama’s ear and soothe it into cooperating. Otherwise, it sat and brayed, spitting whenever its rope was pulled on.

“Will this forest ever end?” Logan complained. “At least a road with a roadside tavern. It would be a nice change.”

“Where are you from?” asked Dorn, falling in beside him.

“Teamsburg,” Logan replied.

“Uh-huh, I been there once before,” Dorn mumbled sleepily.

“It has probably changed a lot since your last visit,” Logan smirked. “Half of it burned and the other half rioted. It was beautiful.”

“Eh, at least you got out,” Dorn replied. “And didn’t have to go to war. The first I got whiff of that conscription I came adventuring in Derome-Delem. I figured if I could not be counted, I could not be missed.”

“I wouldn’t have had to go to the war. They have a way of losing track of an influential watch-mage’s son’s conscription papers. I mean, my father would have insisted I go, it being ‘fair’ and all, but I made sure it was never an issue,” Logan laughed. “Fighting somebody else’s war is shite and all, but to run away from war right into certain death? Does that make sense?”

“I could be safely back in Cutter Jack’s and living off the gold Flora and Bones and I found in that old fortress, but Nephthys saved me for a reason, so I mean to help Ratchis as much as possible,” Dorn replied. “But I’m not suicidal either, I still haven’t decided if I am going into Hurgun’s Maze. By all accounts, that place will be no joke.”

“You are going in the wrong direction!” cried a high-pitched voice from up in a tree.

“Yeah!” concurred two more. The three pixies appeared, bending down to look at them with furrowed brows and arms folded across their chests; their wings buzzed angrily.

“You are going deeper into the forest and will anger the giants and they will smash you!” said the red-headed pixie. “Can’t say you wouldn’t deserve it.”

Everyone stopped and Ratchis took a quick look around and then frowned.

“They are lying,” whispered Martin to the half-orc. “I am certain we are going the right way. I got a decent view when I checked last night.”

Ratchis nodded. He checked the wind and looked up at the sun three times. It burned dully from behind a thin cover of gray that stretched from horizon to horizon. He was certain they still traveled due east.

“Okay, okay! You figured out our trick! We admit it, but you are going to miss talking to Old Man Tree and Mister Rock Man, and they can tell you all about the captured elf-lord that needs your help.”

“Shut up! You said too much!” one of the dark-haired pixies smacked the red-headed one in the back of the head and the third one laughed.

“Mister Rock Man is liable to ground them up into little colored pebbles, anyway,” said the red-headed pixie, rubbing his head as he sulked.

“Mister Rock Man? Old Man Tree? Sounds like a fairy tale gone awry,” Logan said.

“Whaddya want? We’re faeries!” the dark-haired pixie on the left squealed angrily.

“Maybe we should go talk to these men,” Martin suggested. “They may have some lore we need.”

“It is likely to be another of their tricks,” Kazrack frowned. “Ignore them.”

“Trick or not, we don’t have time,” Ratchis added.

The tiny kitten on the llama leapt to the ground, its form growing nearly liquid for a moment as it turned into Roland. He was aghast.

“A friar of Nephthys is going to ignore the good possibility of someone is being held captive against their will somewhere in this wood and just go along his merry way?”

“I pray for Nephthys to forgive me,” Ratchis rasped in reply. “I would like nothing better than to look into this and free a captive if it needs to be done, but we have no time. We must be there when the light shines at dawn on that day or else we cannot hope to figure out how to get in Hurgun’s Maze, and if we cannot do that and someone else figures out a way to do so, all of Derome-Delem would be at risk. A choice needs to be made and I have made it.”

“For all of us, it seems,” Roland replied.

“You are free to do as you please,” Ratchis said. “You chose to come along with us.”

“Forgive me, Ratchis. I should not presume to tell you how to honor your goddess,” Roland looked right into Ratchis’ eyes, and then looked down demurely. “I am tired. We have not slept or ate in too long.”

“Ooh! That cat’s got a silver tongue,” said the red-headed pixie.

“Is Old Man Tree a pixie? Is he your leader?” Martin asked.

“No!” all three pixies replied together.

“I’m the leader! said the red-headed one.

“No! I’m the leader,” said the dark-haired one on the right.

“No way! I’m oldest and wisest,” said the third.

“Wisdom is overrated,” said the second.

“Wait. Which of you is the leader? I think from now on we’re only going to talk to the leader,” Martin said.

The pixies fell to arguing among themselves about who was leader once again, and then it devolved into invisible fisticuffs.

“I guess I am not the only one around here with a silver tongue,” Roland winked at Martin.

“Ew! I’ve seen where he puts his tongue, Marty. I don’t think that’s a compliment,” Gunthar snorted when he laughed at his own joke.

”You’d do it too if you could reach,” Roland quipped.

“Heh. I’d try *anything* at sea,” Gunthar replied with a grin.

“Enough. Let’s keep going,” Kazrack said.

“To the Old Man Tree?” Two of the pixies were still fighting, but one of the dark-haired ones had extricated himself. “Be careful,” he placed his cupped hand to his mouth and whispered. “The goatfoats are near there and they don’t like men or cats.”

“What is he talking about?” Logan said with a look of skepticism.

“Satyrs. Half-man, part-goat. They like to have sex and hit people with sticks,” Martin replied.

“Ha! You might get some after all!” Gunthar laughed, and Logan shot him a glare.

The party was about to begin their march again when the pixies called to Kazrack. “Lots of *kafka* mushrooms grow near there.”⁸⁷

The dwarf’s eyes widened, but then he frowned. “That means there’s a cave near there. Another trick. Unless you’d be willing to go and bring us some.”

“Or moonless midnight mushrooms,” said one of the other pixies, he was sitting atop the head of the red-headed pixie who lay across the thick branch of a tree huffing and puffing.

“What are those?” Kazrack asked.

“Delicious, hallucinogenic and deadly,” Martin answered.

“Where can we find those?” He asked the pixies.

“Go see Mister Rock Man,” replied the red-headed pixie.

“Why do you want those?” Kazrack asked.

“They are very rare and are reputed to have magical properties,” Martin replied.

Logan frowned and looked to Ratchis who snorted his disapproval.

“Is this elf-lord a captive of the witch?” Roland asked the pixies.

“Maybe so,” they replied coyly.

“I say we go free the elf and piss off the witch,” Logan suggested.

“And her guardian,” one of the dark-haired pixies added and then covered his mouth.

“Is Mister Rock Man the guardian?” Roland asked.

“No, it’s the Black Beast,” the red-headed pixie said.

“This gets worse all the time,” Logan said. “Forget the whole thing. Ratchis is right. Let’s go.”

The pixies began to whine and complain.

⁸⁷ Kafka is a coffee like beverage made from steeped subterranean mushrooms. It is common to dwarves and gnomes.

“They’re leaving the elf-lord to die,” one of the pixies cried.

Kazrack stopped and sighed and looked at Ratchis who had also stopped, and then the dwarf turned to look at the pixies opened his mouth and then closed it again. He scratched at his beard and finally said, “We will go seek out the captured elf-lord if you make an oath to not hinder or harm us along the way.”

The pixies each imitated the dwarf’s mannerisms and finally the dark haired one on the right asked, “Would telling the Goatfeet you were coming count as ‘hindering’?”

Kazrack looked to Martin.

“Satyrs,” was all the watch-mage said.

Kazrack turned back to the pixies, “Yes.”

“Yeah, we can’t promise that,” replied the first.

“Nope. No, we can’t,” agreed the second.

”We promise!” said the third, nodding his head vigorously.

“Yes! Yes! We promise!” the first two said, now nodding as well.

Kazrack sighed again, and Ratchis grunted.

Logan grumbled and Gunthar and Roland laughed. Martin only smiled.

“We are leaving,” said Kazrack.

The Keepers of the Gate marched until Ra’s Glory had reached its zenith and then collapsed. The forest was only a shadow behind them.

Hours later at Ratchis’ urging, they picked up and moved camp a few leagues to the east, where a steep hill gave way to an even steeper drop on the other side. The Keepers of the Gate made their way to the top and took in the view.

In the distance, beneath the creeping gloom of evening there was a dull red glow that covered the earth. A stiff warm wind blew across the top of the ridge, and the sky above the glow was black and roiling, at times tongues of what could only be flames shot way up into the air and then shattered into thousands of dying fireflies.

“How far away is that?” Kazrack asked.

“That’s Greenreed Valley,” Martin replied, solemnly. Ratchis nodded.

There was a long silence.

“Looks like a forest fire,” the half-orc finally said.

“War,” said Logan. “Soldiers burn and pillage.”

“Could it be the neighboring kingdom... the Setites, what is it called?” asked Roland, transforming to his human shape once again.

“Menovia,” answered Ratchis.

“More likely they went to war with the gnomes,” Kazrack said.

“It could be the influence of the Maze. There is a plane of fire,” Martin said. “It is one of the greater Otherworlds...muh-made entirely of fire and molten rock. It could be leaking through to our world. Remember the great many-headed snail we encountered.”⁸⁸

Again, there was a long silence as they watched the glow brighten, as the surrounding sky grew dark.

“Was not the temple of Bast in Gothanias right on the border to Greenreed Valley?” Roland asked, already knowing the answer. “We must go there first.”

“We are not going anywhere near there,” said Ratchis.

“What?” Roland’s face looked as if someone had just passed noxious gas.

“We need to find where the beam of light will hit on the ridge and then reflect to show us the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze,” Ratchis replied. “We do not know how long it will take to find the proper spot, and others may be looking for it. We must be careful and let no one know we are back. The temple of Bast is too close to Summit. Someone might see us.”

“It is nearly three weeks before the proper alignment of the sun will occur,” Roland said. “Unless you told me wrong back at Mercy’s house.”

“We don’t know how long it will take to find,” Ratchis said very slowly. “And we cannot afford to meet any distractions along the way. And if the Gothanians have attacked the gnomes I would rather not know, for it would be difficult to ignore that to insure we get into the Maze.”

Roland’s jaw dropped open. “Are you joking, Ratchis?”

“He never jokes,” said Gunthar, laughing.

The Bastite ignored him and continued. “That is a slippery slope you tread on, Ratchis,” he said. “You cannot fool the gods or your own conscience by remaining willfully ignorant.”

Ratchis shrugged his shoulders.

“I am afraid I must insist we go to the temple of my goddess,” Roland continued. “It is my duty to see the place and see what harm has come to it, and it might be a place we can hide and rest until the time comes to enter the Maze.”

“We cannot risk it,” Kazrack said, agreeing with his long-time companion.

Roland’s mouth opened again, and he let out a confused sigh that turned into a growl. He looked to Martin the Green, but the watch-mage simply looked down as his own feet silently.

“If it were a dwarven temple threatened by a malevolent force, what then?” Roland asked the dwarf, his voice rising in pitch, as he grew angrier.

“I would still ignore it,” the dwarf replied, solemnly. “The fate of Derome-Delem is more important than a single temple.”

“I may have to go on my own then,” Roland replied, letting the steam out of his demeanor.

“You promised to help us!” Now it was Kazrack’s turn to be angry.

⁸⁸ The dire flaming flail snail. (see session #18)

“Enough,” Ratchis sighed. “He must do what his heart tells him, and so must we all, fighting now solves nothing. I see a trail down this ridge that we should be able to use even in this light, and then we’ll make camp.”

The half-orc began the descent, and the others followed, except for Roland who transformed into his panther form and stalked off into the darkness. He did not return to camp until dawn, carrying three small rabbits in his jaws. He ate one raw and whole, and Ratchis undercooked the other two, but the party ate them anyway.

Teflem, the 13th of Keent – 565 H.E.

Over the next few days, they crossed many streams, and many clusters of younger trees. The nights were growing colder, but the glow from Greenreed Valley was growing brighter and closer. Less than three days from the valley, ashy breezes would sweep across them every few hours, making their eyes burn and tossing up the dry earth. The trees and plants were all covered in a thin film of gray and everything seemed sickly and dying.

Ratchis and Logan took off to scout ahead, and the others eventually caught up to them where they had found the charred corpses of several gnolls at the base of a scorched tree. Several spots looked like they had been burning for quite some time.

“What could have done this?” Logan asked.

“The dragon?” speculated Kazrack.

”I don’t think so,” Martin replied. Roland crept up, still in his panther form, and sniffed the bodies and then moved quickly away. “Though it certainly looks like a flash fire of some sort.”

“They have spear wounds in addition to their burns,” Ratchis said. “And I found some kind of large bird tracks. Most were ruined by the falling ash and winds, but it was some kind of large bird, maybe five feet tall, long legs, probably flightless.”

Martin the Green shrugged his shoulders. He knew of no creatures that matched that description. Suddenly, he noticed a translucent orb floating near Kazrack, and he knew no one else could see it.⁸⁹

”We are being watched,” Martin hissed.

“Point me towards the foul orb,” Kazrack said, grabbing hold his pouch of runestones, and Martin pointed. “Natan-ahb, I call on you to cast the shadow of the First Mountain across this wicked arcane eye so that it may obscure the vision of our vile foes.”

“Very good,” said Martin when he saw the orb disappear. Kazrack laughed and reaching up clapped Martin on the back.

“Do you think it was Richard?” Kazrack asked.

“Probably.”

“Or Rindalith,” added Ratchis.

That night they camped under some thorny trees that had resisted the various fires they now found signs of every few miles. They did not dare make a fire of their own.

⁸⁹ **DM’s Note:** At this point Martin was casting *Detect Scrying* (which lasts 24 hours) every day at noon.

Anulem, the 14th of Keent – 565 H.E.

The next morning, they were in a thick wood again, and in places trees still smoked and smoldered, but a consistent rain kept any threat of flames spreading at bay.

Ratchis noticed there was no sound of birds or other small animals or insects. There was only the ‘splut’ of fat raindrops in the ash, covering everything in a disgusting black and brackish paste.

The tall ridge wall of Greenreed Valley was visible whenever the clouds parted to let the sunlight through for a moment before sealing it away again. The forest floor banked slightly upwards towards the valley as they approached just slightly south of west.

Just after noon they walked through an open field marked with low barren trees and an occasional coniferous bush that looked like great motionless gray dust balls. In some place the trees and bushes were clumped closely together, causing the party to go wide around them, but mostly they were spread fairly widely apart. Much of the landscape was burned here as well.

Ratchis led, as usual, with Logan close behind him. The half-orc stopped and pointed. Logan could see small puffs of smoke appearing from up head on the banked ground. Something approached from the direction of the valley, something moving fairly quickly, but that was low to the ground.

“Stop! Something is coming,” Ratchis raised his hand.

Now they could all see shapes moving through the trees and bushes. At first only a head would be visible for a moment, and then a spearhead hopping up and down for several dozen yards, before disappearing behind a tree or bush. Puffs of smoke and flashes of fire accompanied the quickly arriving creatures.

“We need to hide!” Martin cried.

“Too late,” Kazrack gasped. At least a score of creatures came bursting through the trees charging in their direction. Short squat dull gray reptilian men armored in chainmail were coming. They wore half-helms fitted to their heads with a long, folded ridge that protruded from the bottom to protect their snouts. Smoke rose from their nostrils as they snorted and hissed. Many held spears, but also had fierce looking battle-axes hanging on the flanks of their mounts, which they urged on. The mounts were strange beasts, five foot at the shoulder; they had two clawed legs with bird-like taloned feet that carried their awkward bodies forward with great strides. The creatures were covered in fine scales and had long necks that held their misshapen heads low to the ground. They had large eyes with cowl-like ridged lids. Their mouths were like a beak of tortoise shell, and when they squawked small goutts of fire shot out from them.

The strange warriors fell into two phalanx formations. One group brought the spears down and charged right towards the Keepers of the Gate, while the second turned off to approach from the south, sliding their spears away and drawing their battle axes.

“Form a line! Form a line!” Kazrack cried. Gunthar cursed and dragged the llama into some thick brush, hoping it might be safe there for a time.

End of Session #77

Session #78

“Maaaw!” cried Fearless, not living up to his name, as Gunthar hurried back out of the brush, with a javelin drawn, readying for when the strange draconic creatures came into range. The llama was deep in some thorny bushes.

“Use the trees for cover so that can’t charge right into you!” Ratchis advised, and then calling to his goddess cast a spell on Roland to help him resist heat and fire. Roland, who was actually in human form for a change, his chain shirt jangling over his fine clothes, called to his goddess to grant him divine power.

“*Lorca Magica!*” Martin chanted, casting *Mage Armor* on himself.

Dorn fired a crossbow bolt at the lead creature, but the bolt went wide, and he scrambled behind a tree to stay near Martin as he reloaded.

Gunthar let loose with his javelin, but it landed short and skittered away harmlessly. He drew his swords.

Frightened of the fire-breathing creatures charging at them, Roland took the time to protect himself even further, as the first of the creatures came upon them. He moved to the back of the group, ducking behind a thorny bush as he loaded his crossbow.

Logan has been waiting patiently, and as he was charged, side-stepped, and brought his sword across the flank of the reptile mount. It cawed and coughed, as steaming blood exploded from its wound. Logan cried out alarmed.

Gunthar batted away the bite of one of the beaky mouthed mounts but grunted as his chain shirt turned away a heavy blow from the rider’s spear. He ignored the rider and chopped at the mount, scoring a deep wound in its neck, but its scaly hide turned away most of his short sword blow.

Kazrack roared as the beak of one of the mounts crunched into the black greave of his plate mail, drawing blood. He pried the thing loose with the blade of his halberd, cracking its beak, and then brought the pole arm around to graze the head of the rider, who reared up his mount.

“I will knock you from your saddle,” Kazrack swore.

“Logan! Protect my flank,” Ratchis commanded, pointing to his left with his great sword as he marched into the fray. “Dorn! Protect Martin!”

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted, and four of the strange fire-breathing reptile-birds slowed down as their riders cursed them in their hissing language. One of the rider’s hissing was slowed down as well, and his spear waved back and forth as if he were carrying a flag instead.

One of the riders noticed Roland and charged at him. The Bastite let his bolt fly and it caught the rider in the helmet, but it kept on coming. The two-legged mount reared at a command from its rider and spat a ball of flame that engulfed the bush. Roland was barely able to leap away, swatting at his clothing with a free hand.

Woosh! And then, woosh, again! The monstrous mounts breathed out flame and soon there was a ring of fire leaping from tree to bush, penning the Keepers of the Gate in.

There was another grunt from Kazrack as the creatures that were coming from the right flank arrived. He felt the bite of a battle-axe against his helm and nearly lost his footing, but instead he swung around and finished the first one that fell upon him, and its mount took off in fear.

Ratchis felt the bite of a spear as he charged a rider that was charging him. Grimacing through the pain, he cleft the rider in twain and then sent the giant striding lizard-bird on its way with nasty chop to the face.

“Ah! Ha!” Gunthar cried with joy as he chopped down the rider in front of him, taking a moment to shove his long sword through its face to make sure it was dead.

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted again, and now two more riders were slowed, along with one of the arriving mounts.

Kazrack turned away from a breath of flame directed at his side, and cleaved another rider off of his mount, and then stabbed another as his mount came in to bite. The dwarf ducked.

“Krauchaar! I dedicate to you this song of snapping bone and rending sinew!” the dwarf praised his gods as he fought.

Gunthar cursed, cutting into the now riderless mount before him, as it bit him in the hip, where his chain shirt did not provide much protection. Everyone’s eyes began to water from the smoky air, as soot settled on their faces, blackening them. The thing turned and ran, and Gunthar gave chase, being brought into the midst of three of the battle-axe wielding reptilian-riders.

“Chop! Chop!” He cried, giddily, and he slashed all three of them and leaping, turned around to wait for them to awkwardly bring their mounts to face him. “I got enough of this for all of you!”

Logan leapt back avoid the bite of one of the bird-things, and it stumbled, tumbling over and dropping its mount. Ratchis side-stepped and chopped an arm off the prone rider, and then brought the point of his sword through its chest. Logan chopped through the mounts long neck with his long sword.

Martin hurried about a flaming tree as he saw one of the riders charging in his direction and bumped right into the spear of another. He cried out and a shaft of green and black flame engulfed him, as he felt the cold pull of the Book of Black Circles on his soul, tempting him to use its power to snuff out all of these fire-breathing lizardmen at once. The green flame shot up the creature’s spear and he was burned by the cold fire. His corpse smoked like a block of dry ice.

The combat grew more chaotic, as the stomping of the party’s feet and the great strides of the reptile-bird-beasts stirred up a cloud of ash that obscured everyone’s vision. Only Martin’s infernal mantle of flame broke through the haze. The ashen ground, already swollen by rain, became a huge puddle of blood-soaked muck, with dying mounts flailing and screeching in the darkness of the cloud. Branches burned and fell, and hissed, and the creatures were coming in from all sides.

Dorn dropped his crossbow unable to get a shot and drew his sword, cutting wildly as a mounted opponent rode past him. He felt the deep bite of an axe to the back of his neck, and only the steel collar he wore connected to his chain shirt saved his life. He fell to the ground and began to desperately crawl away.

“And you! And you!” Gunthar whooped, cutting down two riders and coughing, wiping his eyes as he tried to get a good look at his next target.

Logan sent a rider’s axe—hand and all—flying high into the air, and he sliced its neck open as it fell. A stab to the flank sent the mount running.

Ratchis roared as he swung his great sword back and forth wildly, cutting down riders and mounts alike, as they tore at him with axe and beak. Kazrack sent one rider sliding through the muck as he cut the mount out from under him, and Roland smashed the thing’s head open with his light mace.

A strong wind blew the cloud low for a few moments, and Kazrack could see Logan chopping at two mounts that hissed and bit at him.

“Logan! Leave the mounts and they may leave you be!” the dwarf cried, and then his advice became a cry of agony as a still ridden beast ripped into the side of his face, sending his helmet flying off. The dwarf spun around and blocked the next bite and then sent the rider toppling to the ground, bleeding profusely from his chest.

Afraid to cast anymore spells, Martin the Green drew his dagger and began to move through the combat stabbing at riders when he could reach them. Dorn followed at a safe distance, having gotten back on his feet, working to keep two or more from surrounding the watch-mage.

Ratchis whacked the head off of a mount and sent its rider spilling to the ground. He looked up and noticed a group of four of the creatures bringing their mounts around to flee.

“They are trying to get away!” Ratchis called. “They may bring more to their aid.”

Without a word, Roland’s form melted and elongated as his arms became tight muscled fore-legs and his nose and mouth stretched out to a snout as his teeth grew long and sharp. In a moment, his black leonine form was hustling through the ash and mayhem to give chase to those that fled. His strong panther legs tearing up the ground beneath him as he deftly avoided tree, stone, and flame in his pursuit.

Roland leapt high into the air, and then fell upon a rider. The rider, mount and panther collapsed into a tumbling ball of chaos. The mount awkwardly leapt back to its feet and fled, while Roland held the reptilian man down with his jaw and ripped out its back and legs with deep rakes of his rear claws. He roared with delight and then went charging after the next one.

Roland looked back as the dust cleared from the second rider he felled to see his companions mopping up the few that were left several hundred feet back. Two more mounts were heading back east, riderless. He turned and saw the riders he pursued disappear around a low hill and decided against continuing.

“Did any get away?” Roland was asked when he returned. He bobbed his panther head up and down and patted the ground twice with his paw.

“Two?” Ratchis held up two fingers.

Roland bobbed his head up and down some more.

Ratchis shook his head. He stopped to call to Nephthys to close his many wounds, and Kazrack called to his own gods as he eyed Martin suspiciously. The glow from the mantle of green and black flame rose high into the cloudy sky.

Kazrack dropped his halberd and drew his flail and began to walk steadily towards the watch-mage. Alarmed, Dorn loaded his crossbow which he had just picked up and pointed it towards the dwarf.

“Ratchis! Kazrack is going to attack Martin!” Dorn warned.

Logan looked back and forth unsure of what to do, and Roland simply stood there. Ratchis whipped around and ran between them, and then turned to Martin.

“Martin, I think...”

“If he is possessed...” Kazrack began.

“I’m fine,” said Martin, and the mantle disappeared without a sound. Kazrack’s grip tightened around the handle of his flail.

“It is like a rush when it comes over me,” Martin explained. “I can feel it creep in as I am focused on casting a spell, but once it happens, I can fight it and I only needed to will it away for the flames to disappear.”

“You should have done it sooner,” Ratchis said.

“I only just now realized that I could do that,” Martin said. “Before I was kind of busy.”

“What’s the matter with your face?” Kazrack asked, fear and disgust growing on the edge of his bass voice.

“Whatever do you mean?” Martin brought his hand to his face and winced. The flesh around his eye was tender, and he felt the skin crumble to the touch. He hurried into his pack for a silver mirror and then dropped it. The flesh around his right eye was gray and drying up, as if dead tissue. There was blackened vein near the surface on that side of his face, and his eye was yellowed.

He slumped to the ground and his head drooped. He let a sob escape and then he choked it back.

Logan looked to Ratchis who just shook his head and looked down.

There was little of value on the fire-breathing reptile men, so the Keepers of the Gate left them to the crows and hurried southeast, hoping to escape any further pursuit. Logan suggested tracking the escaped creatures back to their camp and bringing the fight to them, but he was voted down.

There were no visible stars when they finally dropped to the ground to sleep under some bushes that seemed to have survived the many fires in the area. Ash and smoke were everywhere here within a league of the valley wall, and it burned when they breathed in.

“I think tomorrow I’m gonna go bring Fearless to where I stashed the can-on,” Gunthar said as he spread out his bedroll beside the hobbled llama. “Debo’s supposed to meet me there, and I want to check on it, make sure everything is set for the plan. I should be back in three or four days. Unless you wanna come with me.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Ratchis grunted.

“I can do what I want!” Gunthar spat.

“I meant us coming with you,” Ratchis replied.

“Oh. Yeah, right... Uh, okay,” Gunthar said, laying down.

“But before you leave in the morning, let’s choose a place to meet up in that time,” Ratchis said.

Ralem, the 15th of Keent – 565 H.E.

The rain and dark clouds melted away to the west. The sun came down in hot streams of gold and glowed against the steel of more clouds in the southeast roiling up slowly in their direction. It was a muggy day that found Gunthar moaning that Ratchis was leading him far from the direction he needed to go in order to meet up with Debo and get to where the can-on was stashed. But Ratchis insisted that the place they meet had to be closer to where the sun’s light would hit the ridge and reveal the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze. The plan was to find the spot and then camp somewhere it could be watched from and wait the two weeks for the proper day.

“Two weeks!” Roland complained, as they marched into the shadow of Greenreed Valley’s ridge. The trees here were also scorched in many places, but this was an old and thicker wood and some of the biggest trees had resisted lighting up. There was still ash over everything, giving the woods the illusion of a winter’s day. “We should go to a town and find out what has been going on in your absence. What was this town called? The one near the temple of Bast? Summit? We should go there. If those fire-breathing things are here in force they surely would have attacked the town.”

“If they have, I don’t want to know about it,” Ratchis replied.

Gunthar snorted and Kazrack frowned, but then the dwarf nodded as if in grudging agreement.

"If they attacked, then it is too late to prevent it," Ratchis continued. "All we would be doing is leaving a convenient trail for Richard or Rindalith or whoever to find. They would expect us to go to Summit. Richard has found us there more than once."

"Slippery slope!" Gunthar whooped and laughed.

"What? Ratchis looked at the Neergaardian.

"Slippery slope! The Pussy said it the other day," Gunthar explained, and jerked a thumb back to Roland, who was fuming. The Neergaardian never lost his smile. "You slide right down that shite-covered slope until you end up just like the friggin' people you claim to hate. Sure, is easy to be good when you can be conveniently ignorant, isn't piggy?"

Ratchis growled.

"For a moment there, Gunthar you nearly sounded like you had a point," Kazrack said. "But you wouldn't pretend to have a conscience."

"That's my point Stumpy, I don't hafta pretend," Gunthar laughed. "I don't got one. I'll tell ya right to your face that I stuck my tallywhacker right in a dwarf whore's mouth to feel her beard itch my balls!" He let out another high laugh and actually stopped to slap his knee, smiling broadly at the memory of it. "You know what to expect from me. You don't need a conscience when you are a virtuous man like I am."

"You don't make any sense," Kazrack replied.

"Maybe not to dwarves," Roland put his two coppers in.

"This here tree looks as good as any," Gunthar said, pointing randomly. "We'll meet here in four days."

He began to pull the llama back in the opposite direction.

"Wait!" Ratchis held up a hand. "What if you are followed or caught? You know too much."

"I had not considered that," Kazrack frowned. "You could be tortured."

"Are you saying I'd talk?" Gunthar laughed. "What kind of torture could they give me that's worse than marching back and forth through the wilderness with you guys?"

"Anyway, all they'd have to do is pay him," Logan said. His hand was on the hilt of his sword.

"Ha! There isn't enough money in all of Derome-Delem!" Gunthar boasted. "Like I said, I am a virtuous man."

"Could we not at least go see the elves?" Roland interjected jumping back in topic. "They would want to know that there was an elf captive back there."

"Arion," Ratchis replied.

"Huh?"

"Arion, the elf-lord," the half-orc croaked, looking down. "I was thinking who the captive the pixies mentioned might have been and it only makes sense that it was Arion. Despite what you think, having to abandon him to captivity weighs heavily on me."

"If Anarie is possessed by one of the drow witches then Aze Nuquerna may have already fallen," Martin speculated glumly.

“She may not be possessed,” Kazrack said. “She may be charmed or has deliberately turned to evil.”

“Anárie would never do that,” Martin shot back.

“Who knows with elves? They have gone back on their word before. History is full of examples,” the dwarf said.

“Once you have decided where we are going to camp, I will transform and seek out the temple of Bast,” Roland stately flatly. “Probably on the morrow.”

Ratchis got Gunthar to accompany them another league, so they were just south of where they thought the spot they were looking for was, up on the ridge.

Along the way, Martin the Green spotted the tell-tale translucent sensor of the party being scryed upon. Stopping to close his eyes, once again the image of Richard the Red peering into a crystal ball while sitting on some cracked stone floor washed before his eyes. Once again Richard looked up and smiled, and the vision disappeared with the sensor.

“I saw it right as it appeared,” Martin said. “He didn’t see or hear anything of value.”

“This time...” Ratchis muttered.

And so, it was time for Gunthar to leave.

“Don’t cry or nuthin’,” the Neergaardian smirked, as he led Fearless away. Martin hurried over and gave the llama a scratch on the side of the head.

“Hey! Little man!” Gunthar called to Logan when he was only about forty feet away. “Don’t forget me! I know your momma won’t!”

“Sleep light!” Logan warned, and he pulled his sword halfway from his scabbard and patted the blade with the other hand.

Gunthar flicked two fingers in the Neergaardian Lordly Salute and was off.⁹⁰

While the others waited at the base of the ridge, Ratchis climbed up the steep incline and took a look around. The top was much as he remembered it. There were some trees and shrubs that could act as cover, but mostly the uneven ground and standing stones could help them disguise their movement. Back to the west the thicker woods atop of the ridge began; further to the east the vegetation was even sparser and the ground rockier for miles until the ridge looped around and got close to where the village of Summit sat upon it.

The half-orc ranger lowered a rope and helped the others up the ridge, one by one. That is, except for Roland who changed to panther form and scabbled up the side on his own.

They took a moment to look into the eastern valley, wiping their faces as smoke came billowing up out of what was once a verdant field beyond. Instead, there was a great rent in the earth, and in the few places where there was still grass and tree, flames were weaving in and out consuming them. Beneath the crack was a dull red glow. The smoke was too thick to see Summit. The western portion of the valley, though ash covered, still seemed untouched. It was more wooded and had uneven ground.

Ratchis led his companions back towards the wooded area atop the ridge, where some fallen logs made even more cover from the valley side. They began to make camp as Roland crawled back out onto the bare part of the ridge after taking a look at Martin’s map. He prowled around for nearly two hours and then came back. He had found nothing out of the ordinary. Dejected, he crawled under some brush and napped.

⁹⁰ Flicking up two fingers with the back of the hand towards the target of the insult derived during the Abeodan-Termermean War in the Fourth Age.

Logan stood to go out and look, but Ratchis put a hand on his arm.

“Rest,” the half-orc said. “In a few hours, those clouds will come in. It will be cooler and darker, easier to hide. Go out looking then.”

Logan nodded.

After an hour they shook off their sluggishness and gathered to share some rations and talk over their plan. Roland just lay at their feet, tongue lolling out onto the ground.

“Before we risk exposing ourselves by searching for a sign of where this is going to happen, we should try to get a look around and see who might see us,” Ratchis said.

“There is no one around for miles it seems,” said Kazrack.

“Someone up on the higher portions of the ridge, or out across the way who gets a flash of sun off of your armor, they might see us and come looking to see who we are,” Ratchis reasoned.

“Fine. I’m too shiny. We’ll send Roland,” Kazrack said.

“I can use my arcane eye to scout around the valley some,” Martin said. “It has quite a range.”

It was agreed.

It took ten minutes of chanting and rubbing bat fur on his face, but then Martin was ready.

With a word and a wave of his arms, Martin’s green robes swelled out and transformed into the ash-dulled sheen of reptilian scales. A heavy tail fell out from between his leg and wings sprouted from his widened shoulder blades. For a moment he was Tanweil, or some close approximation, but then he disappeared. Invisible, took off for a few moments’ freedom.

The eye skirted invisibly along the valley floor, passing crisped corpses of men and animals. He caught a glimpse of the camp of the fire-breathing reptile men, and saw they were fighting among themselves. Figuring he could not glean much from watching the strange men, he sent the eye zooming across the valley floor and up the ridge to the west, his eye caught by a flash of white. Here the ridge splayed out into ever-widening plateaus like giant steps down to the sunken floor of the western valley. It was a place marked on his maps as ‘the Amphitheater’. The top of the ridge was the highest point in the west, and trees were the least spoilt or burnt there. They were thick, and there was even still some green showing amid the gray.

There was a camp up there at the top of the Amphitheater. Cleverly hidden as to not be seen from below or from the ridge, but to an invisible eye whizzing about the trees it was clear as day. There were nearly a dozen tents set up beneath trees, with branches and brush moved around them to grant some camouflage. There were platforms in the trees connected by planks creating something of a perimeter. And on those platforms, and amid those tents stalked men in dark cloaks—simple woolen clothing of black and bronze. Their heads were shaved save for one tuft or braid. Some even had their eyebrows shaved off, most wore sandals, but some were barefoot.

Monks.

The ones walking the perimeter carried spears. Martin sent the eye deeper in the camp, hurriedly trying to get a count of how many monks were here before his spell expired. He had gotten to nearly twenty-seven when he noted a larger pavilion tent atop a rise in the ridge. Just within, were stacked several footlockers, and the top was filled with scrolls that spilled out. The watch-mage sent the eye around the flap and there he saw a squat man poring through scrolls. He wore a robe and sandals. His head was shaved, but gray stubble was growing back in, and his face was a lattice of whip marks, his eyes swollen and disfigured, and his nose askew from several breaks. His lower lip was torn, pierced by a weighted spike of metal that curved back into the mouth.

The spell ended.

Martin the Green swooped over the valley once more. He saw more reptile men, these with plate mail made of a strange red ore, running down ones that looked similar to those the Keepers of the Gate had fought the day before.

He returned and told the others what he saw.

“But isn’t that around where the beam of light is going to hit?” Kazrack asked. He pointed in the vague direction of the amphitheater. “Over there?”

“Yes,” replied Ratchis. “They must be seeking a way into Hurgun’s Maze to try and talk to Anubis.”

“The scrolls might have been old records or accounts of Hurgun,” Martin said. “He must be trying to narrow down even further where the entrance to the Maze once was.”

“Seems like he’s narrowed it down pretty well,” Logan commented. “We may need to deal with them.”

“No, we wait,” Ratchis said. “It is nearly cloudy enough for you to go out and look. Occupy yourself with that.”

Martin coughed twice loudly.

Everyone looked at the watch-mage and he gestured over near Kazrack with his head.

“Yes, we should definitely attack the reptile men,” he said, too loudly and nodded.

“Whatever is the matter with you?” Kazrack asked.

“Richard is watching us again,” Martin sighed. “I was hoping we could feed him a fake story, but then I realized I could never get you all on the same page without saying anything.”

“On the same page as what? Did we write something down for us to say when Richard is watching?” Kazrack asked.

Logan and Dorn laughed.

“He is still watching,” Martin hissed.

“Why didn’t you say so!?” the dwarf yelled.

“Quiet!” Ratchis hissed. “Voices can carry across the valley even if the smoke obscures vision. We don’t need more than Richard to know where we are.”

“Well, before he knew we were in some wood, now he knows we are near the valley,” Kazrack replied.

“Shut up!” Ratchis barked.

“I’m going,” Logan said, and he snuck out to the east as the light of Ra’s Glory faded. The clouds had arrived before sunset, offering enough shade to lessen his chance of being spotted. A soft rain fell and the whole valley seemed to hiss. The eastern portion was obscured by a cloud of smoke as tall as the sky itself. He searched for a couple of hours, and the only thing he could find of note was a deposit of mica out in a particularly barren area. The stones there were uneven, and clumps of the shiny mineral seemed to face each other in lines going from southeast to northwest.

He made his way back.

Roland yelped as a moment seemed to stretch out before him as the world faded to black, save for a pinprick of gold that seemed very distant. A woman's voice emerged from it, "Roland, it is Norena. At temple, near Summit with Richard. Promises you all safe passage to leave but wants you to come see him here. " And suddenly he knew he could reply, and that the strange drawn moment would be gone. "We will come," he said.

"The sensor's gone," Martin announced.

"Rowr!" Roland said, getting up and moving towards Ratchis. "Rowr! Rowr!"

Ratchis looked at the panther and scrunched up his face.

"Rowr!" Roland said again and threw his heavy forepaws on the half-orc's stomach, knocking him back a half step. "Rowr-whurr!"

"What the hell is the matter? Get off! Wait a second," the half-orc clutched the scored chain he wore around his waist and called to Nephthys.

"What is it?" he asked Roland again, and the panther understood. To everyone else, Ratchis was snorting and grunting.

"Is that orcish?" Kazrack asked Martin, frowning.

"No, he can speak with animals," Martin said. "It is a boon of his goddess."

Thomas leapt down onto Martin's shoulder from a nearby tree branch.

"He is talking some kind of cat language?" the squirrel chattered in Martin's mind. "Can he speak squirrel?"

"Yes, I can," Ratchis answered for himself, smiling. "How are you?"

"Tired and hungry. How do you think?" Thomas snipped back. "Can you speak dog, too?"

"Yes," replied Ratchis.

"Dogs are dumb," Thomas quipped, and he leapt down to the ground to sniff at Roland.

Roland explained about the *sending* to Ratchis, who relayed it to the others.

"Why would she work with Richard?" Kazrack asked. "I thought this cat goddess of yours was a good god."

"Richard may have her charmed," Ratchis offered. "We know he has used charm before."

"It is a trick. We should not go," said Kazrack. "Ignore it."

Roland transformed to his human shape in a sudden angry blast, his voice cracking.

"Are you saying I should ignore a charmed priestess of Bast being controlled by a mage in a desecrated temple of our goddess?" the Bastite was agog. "What the hell are you thinking? What if it was a dwarf priest?"

"We have decided..." the dwarf began.

"We should go," interjected Ratchis.

Kazrack did a double-take.

“The point of not going anywhere was for no one to know we were here,” Ratchis explained. “It is too late now. But...”

Ratchis stopped and turned to Martin.

“If it comes to conflict with Richard, we can count on your aid, right?” the half-orc asked the watch-mage.

Martin scratched his chin and then looked down and then looked up.

“If at all possible, we should take him alive, if it comes to that. I have an obligation to return him to the Academy to face the masters,” Martin said. “But I believe he is summoning us because he has recruited other adventurers to his cause and hopes to enter the Maze with them, and maybe hopes to form an alliance with us.”

“How long are we going to go on trusting him?” Kazrack asked, disgusted.

“He is good-intentioned, if nothing else,” Martin replied. “It might be that an alliance would work for us.”

“We should vote,” suggested Ratchis.

“We should not go,” said Kazrack.

“You know where I stand,” said Roland.

Martin hesitated and then said, “I think we should go.”

“Yeah, let’s go,” Logan said, coming back into camp. “Where we going?”

“A temple of Bast where one of our enemies awaits us,” Kazrack said, sourly.

“Oh, then definitely, I want to go,” Logan replied.

“That settles it,” said Ratchis. “We’ll leave in the morning.”

End of Session #78

Session #79

Isilem, the 16th of Keent – 565 H.E.

Morning came with a cold rain—mist drifted lazily across the valley. The Keepers of the Gate were slow to get moving. Roland and Logan went out to scout, the former in panther form. The others discussed spell choices, Martin's ability to reconnoiter with magic, and the availability of components for important spells like *invisibility*.

Around two hours after awaking and preparing spells, while Roland and Logan were still gone, they heard the hurried hoofbeats of horses outside of the valley ridge. They galloped past loudly to the east, and then were gone. Soon after, Roland and Logan returned.

"There were three riders," Logan said. "They wore burgundy cloaks and ring mail armor. They were riding fast."

"Yes, the horses had the smell to them like they were lathered," Roland explained, changing back to human form. "They had been pushed hard of late."

"Those are Gothanius' colors," Martin said. "But Gothanius has no standing army."

"The militia was being roused when we left here," Ratchis reminded the Watch-mage. "And with everything going on, the king may have hired some more mercenaries."⁹¹

"There seems to be an awful lot going on around here," commented Dorn, wringing out the knit cap he often wore to keep his balding head warm.

"Now you know why our stories are so convoluted," Ratchis snorted. "Anyway, if there are riders around, we should wait until closer to nightfall to head out. There is less chance to be seen, and we are more likely to hear them before they do us. That is, if people can remember to be quiet."

"Gunthar isn't here, I think we can manage," said Logan. "Though, if you had let me cut out his tongue that wouldn't be a problem either."

Ratchis ignored him.

"I can use this delay to finish my studying of the *darkvision* spell," Martin said. "Now if Ratchis could find me some wild carrots for the component."

"I'll keep an eye out for them," the half-orc ranger replied.

Many hours later they headed out, making their way down the ridge and then eastward around it to turn north, hoping to find an easy place to make their way back up well north of Summit.

The damp was still in the air, but the clouds had parted, revealing a gray waning moon and the twinkling lights of the Dolphin.⁹²

"So, your father's a watch-mage?" Dorn asked Logan.

"Yep."

"Ever consider taking up the study of magic yourself?"

"I was not the one with the aptitude for it in my family," Logan replied.

⁹¹ The King hired mercenaries to survey the area north of Greenreed Valley and they came into conflict with the Garvan gnomes, leading to two very different accounts of what happened. (See Sessions #39 and #50).

⁹² The Dolphin and the Squid are two constellations made up of eleven stars that move across the northern sky as the year passes.

“So, others do?”

“Yes.” Logan’s answers were often brief.

“All my family are sailors and dock-workers,” Dorn said.

”Not a bad life,” Logan said.

“But not a good one either,” Dorn said. “Not for me, anyway. It always bothered me that my family risked everything to escape servitude, but now they serve some other men for a few coppers.”

“Well, you serve Ratchis,” Logan said.

“That’s out of respect,” Dorn said, snapping a bit. “That’s because Nephthys showed me something the day Ratchis and the others rescued me and my former companions.”

“Well... I’m glad you’ve found a way of life that agrees with you,” Logan said, getting uncomfortable with religious talk. “Will you join the priesthood?”

“Maybe. I have thought about it. Maybe after this Maze-thing. If I even go in... Still not sure about that.”

“Me, too,” Logan admitted.

“I figure, if the danger to the world is so great, someone needs to stay outside and give warning if something goes wrong,” Dorn reasoned. He looked right at Logan. “Is that cowardly?”

“Not if it’s for practical reasons,” Logan replied. “It is not to avoid getting hurt, but then again I don’t want to get blasted into the Abyss either.”

“Well, let’s pray to Nephthys we won’t,” Dorn laughed.

At the front of the line, Ratchis and Kazrack talked quietly.

“When we meet Richard the Red again, you will need to control yourself,” Ratchis was telling the dwarf.

“Why do you need to tell me to control myself?” the dwarf asked annoyed.

“Because you’ve lashed out at him in the past.”

“That was before we agreed to converse with him,” Kazrack replied. “Though I do still think it will come to a fight. He will either try to stop us from going to the Maze, or want to follow us or something, and it will come to conflict.”

“I don’t think so,” said Ratchis.

“If it does, we need to make sure we use non-lethal means of stopping him,” Martin reminded them.

As they came to where the forest ended and the great valley that made up most of Gothanius appeared to the east, they veered north to stay in the cover of the many pine trees that grew there, marching parallel to the trail, but a quarter mile off of it.

Ratchis heard a horse behind them on the trail. Quickly, Martin the Green created an illusory thicket between two trees and the party crouched there. The horse trotted up the trail adjacent to them. It whinnied and stopped and seemed to move around in a circle and break through some brush and stop and neigh and let out a frustrated breath, and then turn again. It rode off, but even as Martin was about to let the illusion down it came back.

Frowning, Ratchis signaled the others to remain hidden and he crept out to see.

There was a horse, but it was riderless, though it had a saddle. It was skittish at first, but Ratchis clucked his tongue and cooed to it, letting it see him, and soon it calmed down and let him take the reins. He could see it had a black feathered arrow hanging painfully from its rear flank.

Ratchis healed the horse, and then called to the others.

“This is strange,” Martin said. “First the other riders, now this horse? And yet, everywhere we have traveled in Gothanuis there have not been many horses. Ponies? Oxen? Yes. But not many horses.”

“It makes sense that they would save their horses for military use,” Roland speculated.

“It’s an orc arrow,” Ratchis said.

Ratchis stroked the horse’s face and whispered in its ear and fed it a wild carrot he had found earlier for Martin. He called to Nephthys to grant him the ear and tongue to talk with the horse.

“Where do you come from?” the half-orc asked the horse.

The animal neighed and its eyes opened wide and for a second it was frightened again.

“The rocky place where things go up,” it said.

“What happened to your master?” Ratchis asked.

“The rain that kills,” the horse replied, and this time it pulled away nervously, and took a moment before nuzzling up to the ranger again.

“Did you smell many creatures?”

“Smelled like you,” the horse said. “But not.”

“How many?”

“A herd.”

“How many rode with you?” Ratchis asked.

“Four hooves and one,” the horse said.

“And how long did you ride before you came under the rain?”

“Many waters and many grazings. Light and dark and light and dark.”

“How many times, light and dark?”

“Several.”

“Did you see those who smelled like me?” Ratchis asked.

“Saw.”

“Was it a camp with food and fire? Or on a road?”

“Not camp. Not road. Tree place. Not road. Not home.”

“Did the others stop to care for your master?” Ratchis asked.”

“Run! Run!” the horse jerked its head nervously and then looked at Ratchis. “Smart. Run.”

Ratchis continued to soothe the horse, taking its saddle off of it, as he explained to others what the horse had said. He then slapped it on the rump, and it went running off to the east.

“It will return to its stable eventually,” he said. “Whatever orcs did this; they are days away and are of no concern of ours.”

“For now,” Kazrack added. Ratchis nodded.

“Demons, watch-mages, drow elves, giants, monks and now orcs,” Logan sighed. He scratched his chin. “This sure is complicated. What do the monks want again?”

“They want to bring back their god Rahkefet,” Martin said. “They say they want to talk to Anubis, but they really want to return power to their new patron, the ‘Lord of the Astray’.”

“And they plan to do that in the Maze?” Roland asked.

“Yes,” Martin replied. “We can assume there will be portals there to many of the extra-planar realm... There is a sensor there!” He pointed over Ratchis’ head. The emerald wizard closed his eyes and projected his will through the sensor, forcing the fog of space and time apart to let him see who it was who watched them.

“Richard again?” Kazrack’s voice was far away to the watch-mage. He could see a small green figure, with scaly skin all over its face and bright green and white hair that sprung out of its head. The thing squeezed its big warty nose and traced a black clawed finger over a frosted crystal ball. It looked up and smiled with snarling teeth.

Martin cast the vision aside and opened his eyes, startled.

“Mozek...” he coughed.

“Everyone quiet!” Ratchis said.

“Could you see where he was?” Kazrack asked.

“Some thorny place like inside a hollowed out bush or something,” Martin said, he grasped his arms about his body and shivered. The image of Chance’s brain being scooped from its skull and smashed into Mozek’s maw flashed in the watch-mage’s mind. “He is still watching.”

“Let him watch,” Ratchis said. “He is still going to die crying for his mother like his brothers all have.”

Dorn shot Ratchis a strange look.

“There is no mercy for fiends,” the half-orc said. Kazrack nodded.

“Is Mozek the one that looks like a monkey?” Logan asked.

“No, he is uglier than a monkey,” the dwarf said.

“You are thinking of Mitha-gogol,” Martin said. The sensor disappeared. “It is gone.”

They marched on, and not too long after Kazrack said, “I still think this is a bad idea. This is certainly a trap. We should have made conditions on how we would meet him. A neutral place.”

“A temple of Bast suits me fine,” said Roland.

“But one of your order is with him, that gives us no advantage,” Kazrack said. “If only Martin could talk to him and arrange something differently.”

“Well, one way he can talk to Richard is by going and talking to him, which is what we are doing,” Roland said, his voice rising in pitch as he let his annoyance with Kazrack show in his attitude, rolling his eyes and clicking his tongue and pursing his lips.

“It would be good if we could meet them outside of the temple, instead of in it,” Ratchis said.

“Okay, I will send Norena a *sending*,” Roland said.

“You can do that?” Martin asked amazed.

“Yes,” the Bastite said. “When we camp, I will do so.”

Ratchis found them a thick brush to crawl under and sleep the day away before the sun was up.

Roland cast out his sending to Norena:

<Norena, we know Richard the Red is there, companions concerned and need assurances, an agreement to meet outside temple. More information an issue before continuing, please respond.>

Back came the response:

<Imperative you come to temple and talk with Richard. No need to be concerned. Come talk. If no agreement, then leave freely.>

“She is not exactly being cooperative,” Roland told the others.

“Then we attack,” Kazrack said. “Let’s not give them a chance to spring their trap.”

“Kazrack, I will not further desecrate that temple of my goddess by being part of an assault on it,” Roland said.

“It is a stupid plan,” said Ratchis. “But I am willing to vote on it.”

“Grrrr! Vote!” Kazrack barked and then he crawled out of the brush and sulked off.

“You do know you have the leadership position of this party,” Roland told Ratchis.

“I disagree,” Ratchis said.

“Deny it to yourself if you like, but it does not change the fact,” Roland insisted. “You called the vote.”

“Anyone could have called the vote,” Ratchis replied.

“But you were the one who did, and the only one who does as far as I have seen,” Roland said. “But I mean this as an accolade, you are doing a good job.”

Ratchis grunted and went to talk with Kazrack.

“Were they always like an old married couple?” Logan asked Martin.

“They always butt heads. It was different when Beorth was around,” Martin replied. “He provided a third head to butt.”

“I almost wish Gunthar was here,” said Dorn.

"I don't!" Roland spat. The dwarf and the half-orc returned having smoothed over their disagreement. Soon they were all sleeping hidden in the brush.

Osilem, the 17th of Keent – 565 H.E.

The rain returned as the sky lightened from black to ashen gray, the world seemed all the same color. Ratchis woke Logan and they crawled out from under the brush and went off to scout around down by the trail they would have normally followed.

The larger valley that made up Gothanius rolled out below them as they crept from tree to shrub, to stay hidden. Visibility was limited, but there was another small wood a mile or so eastward, and just beyond it was what appeared to be tents and wagons. There was the sound of a horn from atop the ridge, so Ratchis and Logan hurried back towards the hidden camp. Crouched behind trees they saw a group of armored riders picking their way down the ridge, their horses making progress skittishly. They were escorting some people with sacks, bags and wheelbarrows. There were women and children among them.

"Looks like they are evacuating Summit," Ratchis told the others when they had awakened.

"Given what is happening in Greenreed Valley that seems like a wise course of action," Roland said. They decided to wait before moving on, in case more riders and refugees came down the ridge to the nearby trail.

It was nearly evening when they were marching again, climbing the black stone hill that flanked the eastern ridge wall. A cold rain was falling again, and it slipped backward and forward to and from ice, whipping horizontally every few minutes.

"Isn't it summer?" Logan said through chattering teeth.

"End of summer," Ratchis replied. "Up here winter comes quick."

"So, what might I expect from this Richard character if it does come to a fight?" Logan asked, changing the subject.

"He can make you think he's your best friend. He can travel instantly from place to place. He can create clouds of noxious gas that makes you fall over in a vomiting heap. He can summon monstrous creatures to do his bidding..." Martin rattled it all off.

"Wow..." Logan whistled. "Why can't you be more like him?"

Martin frowned and his shoulders drooped, and he went on marching. The upward march was broken up by a few short climbs as the Keepers of the Gate hoisted themselves up over earthen shelves lined with outcroppings of slick crumbling slate, but finally there was a long march across a wide plateau of gray stone turned black with rain and mud.

"I think we can make camp over there," Ratchis said, pointing to the darker shadow of tall rocks capped with brush. He talked loudly to be heard over the rain.

"What's that?" Logan yelled, shielding his eyes to keep the rain out as he pointed to the northwest. A huge form was gliding down out of the clouds, and then with a flap of its wings made a wide bank back up from the south and around again as it came down. It flew in and out of their sight as it circled, the darkness of night creeping across the hill.

"We got company!" Logan cried diving behind a stone and drawing the composite bow Ratchis has lent him.

“Oh shit,” Martin muttered, casting *shield* and looking around for some cover. He went over to Logan and with a word and a wild carrot made the rogue able to see in the dark. Calls went up to the gods, as Ratchis, Roland and Kazrack all cast spells.

And down it came. It had a broad leonine body and huge bat-like wings but did not have much of a tail. The thing’s draconic head seemed a little too far over on the left of its shoulders, but then they could see it had not one head, but two. On the other side was the head of a huge ferocious goat with blood red horns. But wait, no, there were three! For there in the center was a lion’s head with a great blood red mane and sharp teeth. The thing screeched and roared and bleated. Its eyes shone bright green and they could smell it as it approached, like sulfur and burning copper that stung the eyes and the back of the throat.

“Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!” Dorn cried out, panic creeping into his voice. He backed away fumbling with his crossbow.

“By the gods! One of the heads is like a dragon!” Kazrack called out. “Careful! It may breathe fire like a dragon.” And he cast a spell to protect himself from fire.

“Spread out!” Ratchis cried. “If it can breathe fire we don’t want to be clumped up!” He cast the spell upon himself as well.⁹³

“Bast! I call your holy prayer down upon us so that we might vanquish this fiendish foe!” Roland cried aloud, and the Keepers of the Gate felt the cat goddess’ power bolster their limbs and hearts.

The chimera came down almost lazily.

“Bast! Thou who art as graceful as though art righteous in your anger, smite this fiend and let it taste your power!” Roland cried out to his goddess, but this time the spell seemed to fizzle as it reached out for thing. “Drat!”

The priest of Bast, began to load his crossbow, as bolts and arrows from the others flew up at the beast. It snarled and roared and bleated, and then banked wide again, forcing the party to turn in order to be ready for its attack.

Martin cast *bull’s strength* on Logan. Roland fired his crossbow and missed.

The thing swooped by and its red dragon head spat a gout of flame at Ratchis. The half-orc ducked and rolled just in time, his spell protecting him from what little flame did reach him.

Kazrack let an axe fly, but it bounced off the thing’s hide.

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted, but the spell had no effect.

Logan and Ratchis leapt at the thing, but Ratchis fell short not getting enough lift. Logan grunted as the dragon head slammed against his hip, but he brought his sword down drawing steaming blood as he tumbled back to the ground. The chimera let loose its bellows and cries and landed behind a barren tree near Dorn, turning to face the party.

Dorn dropped his crossbow and pulled his sword, but swung with trepidation, his fear was evident in his body language, and his blows fell short. Ratchis, Kazrack, and Logan came rushing over, with Roland taking up the rear. The dwarf was closest, and he sidestepped a butt from the goat head and slammed his halberd blade into the lion face.

Martin cast a spell and a small globe of light appeared beside him and bobbed along with him as he approached.

Logan arrived, but his blows were knocked away by the dragon head, and Ratchis got there just in time to get butted in the face. Kazrack’s roar echoed the lion’s, as his armor turned away the heavy blows of the thing’s two claws and he beat away the lion bite with his halberd.

⁹³ **DM’s Note:** Resist Energy

The dragon head spat fire once again, but Kazrack and Ratchis resisted it with their gods' help, and Logan was able to evade the blast.

"I offer your pain to Krauchaar!" Kazrack cried, plunging his halberd into the thing's chest as it reared up to attack again. He twisted and jerked it free, slamming the goat head in the side of the face as he drew back.

Roland came flying over the dwarf's head in panther-form, snarling as he took a bite from the dragon head, but he managed to land atop it grasping deep in the lion's mane with his jaws as he ripped up its back.

Ratchis stepped in and brought his sword down on the goat head as the beast was distracted by pain. Logan moved in from the other side, accompanied by Dorn, as Martin had his *radiant spark* hover in the dragon's eyes.

The dragon head reached back and bit into Roland's flank, as Ratchis felt a claw rip down his front. The lion jerked forward to bite Kazrack but met halberd blade instead. The pole-arm sliced open the side of its mouth and then slid down to its throat, prying it open.

"Raargh! For Krauchaaaaaar!" Kazrack bellowed, chopping down with his pole-axe once again as the chimera collapsed and seemed to shrink as it let loose a cloud of acrid dust, collapsing into a shriveled reminder of its previous horror.

"Hmph! The manticore did not shrivel up like that," Kazrack complained. "I was hoping for one of its heads."

"That's the kind of thing that killed half my party," Dorn said, collapsing to the ground. "It might be the same one."

"Then we have avenged them to the best of our ability," said Kazrack.

"Yes, good work everyone," Ratchis said encouragingly.

"Where did that thing come from?" Logan asked.

"Mozek, most likely," Ratchis replied. Martin nodded.

"So not Richard the Red?" Logan asked.

"No, I do not think even Richard would employ such creatures, plus for whatever his faults I do not think he wants us dead," Martin said.

Tholem, the 18th of Keent

Ra's Glory was warm and bright the next morning, and as the party made their way along the final leg of the journey to the temple of Bast it burned off the cold bite of the previous few days. They followed a narrow rocky climb lined with firs that kept them from being seen from the ridge. It proved to have been a good idea, when an hour later they heard riders hurrying along the top of the ridge and come down it, heading southeast. The riders crossed over the party's trail behind them. From the glimpse they got there were at least a dozen with some pack horses as well.

"That could be bad news," Martin said. Ratchis nodded.

By mid-afternoon, they reached a place where the ridge wall and the black flinty hills of the northern border of Gothanium created an acute canyon of sharp rocks flayed out in two directions. Above, atop the ridge, the former temple of Bast was nearby. Martin the Green cast *levitate* on Ratchis and then climbed on his back, and mentally raised and lowered the two of them as the half-orc took each member of the party in his meaty arms one at a time.

Logan nearly climbed instead, but finally decided against it and took the awkward ride.

The temple was set back about eighty feet from the ridge edge, an abandoned stone garden stood in that space with a cracked fountain. The place looked much like the last time some of the party members had been here.⁹⁴

The trees and vines of the surrounding wood had grown out under the paving stones of the courtyard, and now it was a haphazard mess of root and stone. There were weeds poking up through the flagstones and a nasty dirty mulch of autumn leaves left to rot beneath mounds of melted snow for years and years.

The building itself was squat and square and had a large iron-reinforced wooden door inset against two wooden statues of cats. The iron was rusted, but the door still bore the carvings of hundreds of cat shapes that all fit into each other elegantly. Its base was made of large brown bricks, while the top portion and roof was made of lacquered logs, now chewed by insects and the weather.

Kazrack began walking to the door, but Ratchis called him back, "Stay within ten feet of me."

"Why is that?" Logan asked.

"My goddess grants me an aura of defense against magics meant to control or trick the mind," the Friar of Nephthys explained.

Logan nodded. He looked around, taking in the scene as the party approached slowly as a group.

Martin walked right up to the door and knocked.

There was no answer, no sound of any kind. Ratchis smashed the side of his fist against the iron-reinforced door three times. This time there was a rattling within and a few minutes later the great door jerked open.

It was Norena of Bast.

She did not look like she was staying in a run-down temple as much as she did someone about to go out for a party. She wore a long red dress, and her red curly locks hung about her bare shoulders, and her blue eyes twinkled in the sunlight. A few freckles had appeared on her perfect little nose since the last time they had seen her. She held an orange tabby in one arm, and had a short sword haphazardly belted about her waist, looking very out of place.

"Ah, you have finally arrived," she said, smiling broadly and looking at each of the Keepers of the Gate in the eye. She moved to let them enter. "Come in!"

"Before we enter, I would like to cast a spell in order to put us more at ease," Ratchis said. "Just to see your intentions."

Norena frowned and clucked her tongue. "You are impugning me? I am a high priestess of Bast, ally of your own patron goddess, though friars are not known for their manners. It is not necessary."

"We feel it is, my lady," Roland said.

"You too, Roland? Don't you trust me?" Norena looked hurt.

"Oh, I trust you implicitly, Norena," Roland replied. "I do not trust Richard the Red."

She turned back to Ratchis. "Swear on Nephthys that this is no trick."

The half-orc friar obliged her and she nodded. He could detect no charming magic upon her.

The party entered. The chamber beyond a small ante-room was the main temple audience chamber. Here the stone floor was cracked and warped as well, as was an old marble bath fifteen feet to a side set into the floor. There were

⁹⁴ See Session #38

the remains of many pews, and some other wooden chairs, but most were rotted away and covered in leaves. The stained glass of the skylight above was long gone. The opposite end of the temple chamber was an enclosed area that formed a rear wall with two flanking hallways that led to darkness beyond. The wall itself marked the back of the altar, which right now was a cracked stone dais, and an empty spot where a statue of Bast had once been.

There were over a dozen cats wandering about.

A red-robed figure stood from the dais steps as the party approached. It was Richard the Red.

“Come in! Come on in! I am glad you came,” Richard flashed his usual smile, but he looked thinner and his auburn beard more scraggily. “Pull up a chair but be careful most of them are rotten.”

A tall man in a breast plate with a nasty-looking mace at his side came stepping out from the right-hand rear hall. He wore a tunic with a golden ankh emblazoned on an open tome. A similar sigil was a golden holy symbol about his neck. His brown hair was cut so short as to be nearly unnoticeable.

“You’ve met Cordell of Thoth?” Richard asked, gesturing to the man. Cordell nodded in acknowledgement. He pulled tome out from under his arm and flipped it open deftly with one hand, taking a quill from within to jot down something.

“Where are the rest of your companions?” Martin asked.

“Martin? Oh, no!” Richard went towards his fellow watch-mage, his face mask of pity as he took note of Martin’s deformity.⁹⁵

Martin turned away, “I do not see any Greyish brothers about.”

“Oh, Razzle? He’s down in the catacombs playing pretend,” Richard laughed, and then took on an exaggerated expression of offense. “And you double-crossed me Martin. I had to learn the hard way things that you knew and weren’t telling me.”

“I was just following your teachings, Richard,” Martin said. “But let’s leave that in the past, everything changes fast, and we have to adapt to that.”

“Oh, you will find me very much in agreement with that,” Richard said, sitting back down on the dais. “It seems like you are finally learning.”

Martin nodded.

“And you must be Roland,” Richard said, calling to Roland who stood to the rear with Norena.

“Yes, I am, and I need wine,” the Bastite said. “I pray you do have some about?”

“Of course,” Richard smiled. “Cordell will you do the honors of showing our guest down to the catacombs to find us a bottle or two to share?”

The silent Thothian nodded and gestured for Roland to follow.

“We can start any time you are ready,” Kazrack finally spoke gruffly, his jaw clenched tightly.

“Talking it thirsty work, Kazrack,” Richard replied. “And you have yet to gather some chairs so I might say my piece.”

⁹⁵ See Last Session (#78)

Roland went for the wine as the others dropped their gear and carried over benches and chairs. He returned with three bottles and Cordell had two more. Soon the wine was flowing, but Kazrack would not sit. Roland sat with a fat calico on his lap, stroking her between the ears as he sipped the wine from one of the two silver cups he carried in his pack and smiled.

Logan sat beside him. "If this place wasn't so run down, I could imagine warming up to it."

"Oh, it isn't so bad," Roland replied. "I have half a mind to fix up myself. The people of Gothanius need to start developing a little culture if they are going to survive in the annals of men. And Bast is all about culture."

Roland stood to get more wine, still holding the cat and stroking it. He called a prayer to Bast to allow him to see into the hearts of men and scanned the chamber.⁹⁶

"You're Logan, right?" Richard the Red asked the young man as he sat again. He took no wine.

"Yeah. What? Is that supposed to impress me? You know my name? With all you been spying on us?" Logan replied.

"But we've met before," Richard said, smiling. "You were eight, or maybe nine, I visited your father and he helped me with a mission I was doing for the Academy then."

Logan nodded stiffly.

"So, tell me what has transpired since we last met," Richard said, addressing everyone again.

"We came here because you said you had something to tell us," Martin replied. "Sufficed to say we have had a hard journey. We may choose to tell you more when we hear what you have to say."

Roland made his way back to his seat, speaking the word of another prayer to help him *discern lies*.

"We want to know what you have to give us is worth any kind of exchange," Ratchis said. "Your guile is running thin."

"Very well," Richard sighed. "I wanted to tell you that we have parallel goals and that we should be working cooperatively to solve the problem that now troubles Gothanius and soon all of Derome-Delem."

"Say what you propose plainly," Kazrack barked.

"Beneath this temple, deep in the catacombs is a black door," Richard said. "Your friends, the Shepherds, stopped a priest of the Deceitful One⁹⁷ from opening it so that what is on the other side can come through, but what they did not know that they did not stop him before he opened it so what is on this side can go where it leads."

"A trapped door?" Kazrack asked.

"A black portal to a planar realm," Richard explained. "The Academy masters would call it a demi-plane, or a pocket plane. In there is the Key Room to Hurgun's Maze."

"We've already been to a key room," Kazrack said. Richard the Red smiled.

"That was more of a map room, Kazrack," Martin said.

"I was able to gather from my, uh...reconnaissance..." Richard began.

⁹⁶ **DM's Note:** *Detect Evil*

⁹⁷ Most people of central Aquerra refrain from saying the names of evil gods aloud, but this is especially true of Seker.

“You mean spying, Richard,” Roland interjected.

“Uh, let’s call it scrying... anyway, I was able to gather that you have a way of figuring out where the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze is, or will be, or something, but my question is, how do you know this entrance will be unlocked when you get there?”

Martin looked at Kazrack who looked to Ratchis.

“Nephthys will open the way for us,” the half-orc said.

“I do not doubt your resourcefulness, Ratchis, but... well, no offense, but have you ever considered that you and your Fearless Manticore Killers...

“We are the Keepers of the Gate now,” Martin said.

“Yes, whatever... have you ever considered that you are not up to handling what you will find in Hurgun’s Maze?”

“Everyday,” Ratchis replied.

“So why do it?” Richard asked. “Go to the Key Room, unlock the Maze and let Norena and I and our companions handle Hurgun’s Maze.”

“You must take us for fools,” Kazrack retorted.

“No, I take you for folk who do not want innocents to suffer because of your own shortcomings,” Richard said.

“What makes you think you can do it, if we cannot?” Roland asked.

“Come now, honey,” Norena said, answering for Richard. “We have more experience than any of you. This is not some ball you plan to go to.”

“And to be totally forthright with you, like I said we have parallel desires,” Richard continued. “I have my own reasons for wanting to fix whatever is going wrong with Hurgun’s Maze, and thus with Greenreed Valley. I ask you for this because I need your help.”

“I am tired your lies and manipulations!” Kazrack shouted and stepped forward.

“Kazrack?” Richard said, softly. “I need your help.” And with that he stood and reached his hand towards the dwarf who raised his own hand defensively. The crimson watch-mage’s hand passed right through Kazrack’s forearm, wavering for a second like liquid hanging in the air. Kazrack felt something cold had pass through his limb.

“Natan-ahb’s Beard!” The dwarf stepped back, startled.

“Is that due to the planar bleed?” Martin asked, non-plussed.

Richard nodded. “Frequent use of my cloak in the vicinity of Greenreed Valley, as far down south as Aze Nuquerna, as far as my research can tell, has left me so afflicted. There are times that I fade away completely and just float about seeing the world but being unable to affect it. Other times I can manifest myself by extreme concentration. Other times I am as I am now, able to interact with the world in a limited form, but these times are growing less frequent. It seems what many of our colleagues call the ethereal plane is really what others would call the Plane of Shadow. I am wasting away, and if Hurgun’s Maze is not found and fixed soon, there will be none of me left to bring before the Academy of Wizardry.”

“Say again?” Martin nearly spilled his wine.

“Do this for me. Go to the Key Room and unlock Hurgun’s Maze. Allow Norena and I and our companions to enter the Maze and do what needs to be done, and if we survive, I will return with you to the Academy to face judgment for my actions. I give you my word.”

“And how do we know that you will keep your word, but accomplish some other nefarious task in Hurgun’s Maze?” Roland asked. “It seems to me you are the kind of man that would give his word and keep it when he can get away with something in-between.”

Richard stood. “I have given my offer.”

“It seems to me that wasting away to a shadow is a just punishment for someone like you,” Kazrack said.

Richard frowned. “You may stay here as long as you like and consider what I have told you. We mean you no harm and you may leave freely whenever you like. I grow tired and my form grows less solid.” Richard’s body seemed to wink out for a moment, and then blink back, but ghostly and translucent. “Cordell can answer whatever questions you may have about the demi-plane to help you make your choice. It was his research that made me realize that this place was important.”

And with that Richard the Red disappeared.

“How long will he be gone?” Martin the Green asked Norena.

“It could be an hour. It could be not until nightfall,” Norena replied. “It changes all the time, but the range seems to be getting towards the longer end.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ratchis said. “We have no time to go to this key room, there is a very limited window of opportunity to learn where the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze is.”

“That might not be a problem,” Martin replied, and then turned to the priest of Thoth. “Do you know if there is a time deferential in this pocket plane?”⁹⁸

“A whatsa whoozit?” Kazrack asked.

“We believe there is,” Cordell said. “Though we cannot be sure exactly the nature of it, all indications seem that a day spent there is the equivalent to less time here on the Prime.”

“What is this place the Key Room is in? Can you describe it?” Kazrack asked.

“I found old records referring to the Mystic city of Topaline in the journals of one of my order who lived with Hurgun as a guest in his maze and for several years, traveling abroad and through the planes with him. It seems that Hurgun took the ruins of this old city as a place to keep a means to summon, lock and open his stronghold from anywhere, merely by reaching this pocket plane,” Cordell explained. “The reason why not many Mystic ruins are found in Aquerra is because the ancients built their cities in areas of space they themselves carved out. Topaline is one of those places.”

“I have a hard time grasping this,” Kazrack said.

“It doesn’t matter, we cannot allow Richard to enter the Maze,” Ratchis said. “At least, not without us, whether we enter this Key Room or not, we are still going to go in there and do what we have set out to do, and if we have to make an alliance with Richard to do it, then so be it, but we won’t be leaving our responsibilities to others, least of all him.”

“But will we have time to do both?” Roland asked.

⁹⁸ DM’s Note: Martin’s player was making a lot of Knowledge (planar) and Knowledge (arcana) rolls during these conversations.

“And if the Key Room is so important why doesn’t Richard go, and we’ll take care of the Maze?” Kazrack asked.

“Richard the Red’s current state would make it dangerous for him to pass into a demi-plane,” Cordell of Thoth replied.

“From the little I know of Hurgun’s Maze it would not be much safer as it essentially a mobile nexus of the planes,” Martin said.

“Yes, but there is another issue,” Cordell said. “Aquerra is a prime material plane. It was created by the gods, and while it can be undone and corrupted it takes a lot of time and effort. This demi-plane on the other hand was created by mortals, and it has been degrading for centuries, being sucked into the plane of Shadow and eventually the plane of Void itself. It would be Richard’s undoing.”⁹⁹

“So, you are saying this city of Topaline and getting to the Key Room itself will be dangerous?” Roland asked.

“As if that couldn’t be assumed,” Logan said, rolling his eyes. “My question is, how much do the monks know? They must not know about this Key Room and portal or else they would be here and not on the other side of the valley, but if we waste time in the Key Room and return with limited time to get into the Maze the camp of monks might overly delay us. We should take them out before we go, and we should take them out even if we don’t go.”

“That is a good point,” Ratchis nodded. “The monks may have an idea where the entrance is already and are waiting for a chance to pinpoint it, and us unlocking the Maze might be it. They do seem to be camped and waiting for something.”

“What exactly does ‘unlocking’ Hurgun’s Maze mean?” Kazrack asked Cordell.

“The accounts and records of Hurgun’s Maze say that while the Maze itself was a nexus not wholly in any realm, there were outer buildings and other fortifications that manifested in this world when he brought it here. This structure is the key to gaining access. We believe that the Key Room can be used to make it manifest, thus together with the knowledge you have about where the entrance is, the task can be accomplished.”

“What do the buildings look like?” Kazrack asked. “Is there a wall? Are there towers?”

“Accounts differ, but it is safe to assume it is a fortress of some sort,” the Thothian replied.

“Richard! Richard!” someone came bursting into the temple from outside. It was a young man with black hair and a permanent sailor’s tan. He wore studded leather armor and held a spear. There was a long sword at his side. Behind him came two more young men. One was even darker skinned, with tight black curls and a chain shirt. He carried a quarterstaff. The other was short and pale with dark brown hair and a thin patch of facial hair on his sallow face. It was Finn Fisher, Carlos, and Josef. The Shepherds. They were out of breath.

Finn stopped short. “Kazrack! Ratchis! What are you doing here? Well, no matter, just in time!”

“Why? What is happening?” Kazrack asked. “Though I am curious what you are doing here as well.”

“A lot of bad things have been happening since you guys went away,” Finn said. “Richard the Red came and offered us his help. He said he was a friend of yours.”

“And you believed him?” Kazrack asked.

“Why wouldn’t we? He is an Academy mage, and wouldn’t you have warned us if someone dangerous was lurking about Summit?”

“He has been very helpful,” Carlos added in his halting Common tongue.

⁹⁹ The Plane of Void is another name for the Negative Material Plane.

Martin the Green looked to Ratchis and the half-orc's shoulders drooped.

"Anyway, outriders have returned from scouting, you know the militia has been mobilized and the women and children of Summit have been drawn back to camps in the main valley," Finn explained. "Those fire lizard things came out of the steam area a couple of weeks ago when it erupted, belching all that smoke into the air. They attacked the town and other outlying settlements like Archet, and if it wasn't that it seems like a new group of them arrive every few days to feud with the ones that are already here, we probably would have been overrun by now. But that isn't the problem right now..."

"Things have gotten really complicated without that," Finn continued. "The interim General, the royal Huntsman, the brother of the Queen was killed by evil demon gnomes.¹⁰⁰ We fought one of them and that thing was nasty. We were barely able to kill it. The militia and mercenaries hired by the king were about to make an attack on the evil gnome village north of Greenreed Valley when the valley itself erupted."

"The gnomes of that village are not evil," Ratchis said. "They are good people who have helped us, and we are sworn to help them. The demon gnomes are a faction, one family of gnomes bent on sowing chaos and causing unrest in the region."

"You know about the gnomes? You never mentioned them to us before, that might have been helpful," Finn said, a little annoyance entering his voice. "That makes sense now, we heard rumors that the Royal Huntsman was negotiating a peace with the gnomes when the attack happened, but everyone assumed that it was those gnomes that did the attacking."

"We should have facilitated the negotiations before we left," Martin said. "We were in too much of a hurry to get to the Pit of Bones and left our job undone."

"It is too late for regrets," Ratchis said.

Martin noticed Finn and Josef were staring at the state of his face and he brought a hand over his eye reflexively.

"Pritchett must have been killed before he ever got to send word to the King about where we were going and why," Martin added. "But Finn, you mentioned outriders returning?"

Finn nodded. "Yes, they reported orcs, scores and scores of them on the march and on their way to Greenreed Valley."

"An army," Carlos shuddered.

"Perhaps the dragon is looking for the Maze?" Ratchis speculated out loud, remembering the great camp and the draconic silhouette they had seen as they made their way back from Nikar.¹⁰¹

"Maze?" Finn asked.

"It is a long story," Martin.

"There seem to be several factions looking for the Maze, but none but Richard seems to be concerned about the so-called 'Key Room'," Kazrack said. "I take that as a sign that he's trying to trick or delay us."

"Or that the others have not figured it out," Roland said. "For whatever faults Richard the Red may have, he is very intelligent and seems to surround himself with capable and informed people." The priest gestured to Cordell and his fellow Bastite.

¹⁰⁰ The party met Gerard Pritchett, the Royal Huntsman in Session #52.

¹⁰¹ See Session #76

Norena smiled, but Cordell was impassive as ever, taking notes on everything.

“There’s more,” Finn said. “More bad news... The king has hired a group of Neergaardian mercenaries not only to help organize the defense effort, but also to find and capture Martin.”

“What?” Everyone asked at once.

“Martin stands accused of abandoning his post,” Finn replied, sadly. “He was not seen or heard from for months. Supposedly, this group specializes in capturing mages.”

End of Session #79

AQUERRA

Session #80

“So, we have a battle-mage, a paladin of Thoth and a small army,” Martin the Green ticked off on his fingers. The Keepers of the Gate had invited the Shepherds to come outside and discuss the situation out of the earshot of Richard the Red’s companions. Finn Fisher had gone on to describe as best he could the company of Neergaardian mercenaries set on capturing Martin.

“They call themselves ‘the Company of the Impervious Ward’,” Finn said.

“Thirty is not a small army,” Logan said.

“It is around there,” Martin quipped.

“It is important for you to know that Richard the Red is not to be trusted under any circumstances,” Kazrack told Finn and his friends.

“But why not? He has been helping to protect the town from the fire newts,” Finn said, growing annoyed again. “I guess you don’t trust us either because I get the feeling that you have been keeping information from us, we might have needed to protect people.”

“It is just that Richard the Red is willing to go to lengths that most of us would balk at because we have a conscience,” Ratchis said. “Including using charm magic, and he is seeking a place where great power might be for the taking, and which are trying to keep anyone from getting their hands on, but mostly the demon-gnomes.”

Logan noted that Josef and Carlos shared a quick nervous glance at that.

“How has the militia and townspeople reacted to Richard being around?” Roland asked.

“Uh, well, he asked us to keep his involvement secret,” Finn said. “He said Martin did such a good job of botching his own reputation that it might not be good for people to know a second representative of the Academy of Wizardry was around.”

Roland could not hold back his laugh.

“What?” Finn asked.

“He is clever,” Roland replied.

“We had better get back to town before anyone notices how long we’ve been gone,” Finn said. “But we can get away again later; do you need anything from town?”

“More wine,” Roland said.

“And a wheel of cheese and some bread,” Logan added.

Finn nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Remember, we are not here,” Ratchis said to the Shepherds. “And everything we told you was in confidence.”

“Don’t worry, you can count us,” Finn said, and the other two nodded. As they walked away Ratchis cast *detect charm* and saw no aura on their allies.

“So, we are not going to the Key Room, right?” Ratchis asked the others.

“As far as I could tell Richard was telling the truth,” Roland said.

“Well, Richard may be telling the truth but still leading us astray,” Kazrack said. “I am against going to this demi-plane place, but I will cast the stones tonight and see what the gods have to say, but if it were up to me, I would let Richard’s companions go to this Key Room. If we tell them we are not going and if they do not go themselves, then we know that it was not as important as he made it seem.”

“So, we aren’t going unless Kazrack’s gods are very clear in their indication, right?” Ratchis re-iterated.

“I can commune with my goddess as well, but it will have to wait for tomorrow as I do not have the spell prepared,” Roland said.

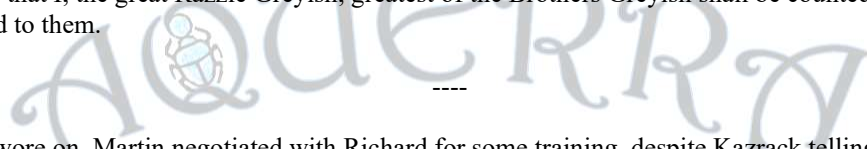
“And even if we don’t seek out this Key Room, we should get these companions of Richard’s to come with us,” Logan said. “You all keep talking about how the Maze is near-certain death, so why not bring some more warm bodies and even up the odds some?”

“We will consider it,” Ratchis said, and then he turned to Martin. “What do you say?”

“I don’t know. We have time before a decision absolutely needs to be made,” Martin replied. “In the meantime, I think I am going to get Richard to give me some training.”

Back inside the temple, Razzle had returned from the catacombs. He wore tall soft boots of a gray-blue color that matched his slicked hair. He had a chain shirt over a cream-colored cotton shirt and a velvet sash that was maroon in color. He drew his sword and brandished it by way of greeting and put it away again faster than most could even see.

“If nothing else Richard the Red says can convince you that we are the ones to undertake this quest for the good of all, let it be only that I, the great Razzle Greyish, greatest of the Brothers Greyish shall be counted among his number,” he said to them.



As the evening wore on, Martin negotiated with Richard for some training, despite Kazrack telling the crimson watch-mage flatly that the Keeper of the Gate would not be going to the Key Room.

“I am not sure if I should be training you when I consider what it is you are carrying,” Richard the Red said ominously. “If you give in to its corruption you will be that much harder to defeat.”

“If I give to the corruption of the Book what little power I gain in these sessions will be the least of your worries,” Martin reasoned.

Richard nodded.

Kazrack, meanwhile, made his way down to the catacombs with Dorn and Logan. The basement level itself gave way to narrow catacombs filled with niches for mummified corpses, most of which were empty. Beyond that the catacombs gave way to natural caves that plummeting beneath the ridge wall of Greenreed Valley. Down there, Logan and Dorn waited outside of small cavern, while the rune-thrower went inside to throw his stones and consult his gods.

Throwing the carved runestones upon the hard stone ground, Kazrack formed his question in his mind and moved the stones into groups based on how they fell, and then suddenly he fell backward, thrashing and foaming as all around him went dark.

Kazrack was running across ashen grass. The wind was high and howling at such a pitch that he felt deaf. He looked back and could see the temple of Bast was looming and swollen against the dark horizon created by the ridge wall. He was within Greenreed Valley, and his companions were blurred figures running beside him. The sky was covered with storm clouds and a crack of thunder drew his eyes before him once again. There atop the highest part of the ridge wall, above the area he knew was called the Amphitheater, buildings were erupting from the earth and way up

into the storm clouds. And from beyond the valley in the west a dark shadow rose and Kazrack was aware of a gathering doom that would come crashing into the valley, smashing against the walls of the buildings and he and his companions had to reach their dubious safety before the shadow arrived.

“It’s a good thing we know where to go and no one else does,” Ratchis’ blurred form said. The sense of urgency was a palpable lump in Kazrack’s throat that swelled up with each step.

“Kazrack! Kazrack! Are you okay?” Dorn was shaking the dwarf when he opened his eyes and smiled widely. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine,” Kazrack said, sitting up and wiping his face and chin with his sleeve. “I have come closer to direct communion with my gods than I ever have before. We shall definitely not be going to the Key Room.”

Upstairs, Kazrack gathered his companions and relayed what he had seen.

“And how do you interpret that as not needing going to the Key Room?” Roland asked.

“We were hurrying to beat some great darkness to the place,” Kazrack said. “If we were there and waiting, we would not have to have been hurrying, and the fact that I looked back and saw this place means we were hurrying from here, and here is where the entrance to the Key Room is.”

“I don’t think that is clear,” Roland said. “Maybe what Ratchis said in the vision means that because we know where the entrance is we can get into the place that was opened up by using going to the Key Room...”

“That is not what the gods meant,” Kazrack said.

Roland shook his head.

“I think Kazrack is best suited to interpret the vision of his own gods,” Ratchis said.

“How can any mortals know what gods may or may not have meant?” Roland complained. “All they do is show us a new way of looking at things and leave the choices to us.”

“Correct, and with this vision I have been given I can see that the Key Room will delay us,” Kazrack said.

“I plan to ask my goddess on the morrow,” Roland said.

Balem, the 19th of Keent – 565 H.E.

Martin began his training with Richard the Red early in the morning, while Logan and Ratchis made some rounds of the area. Kazrack retreated into the catacombs again to pray and work on his King’s Men pieces,¹⁰² while Roland swept off the altar area and sanctified it so he might commune with his goddess in a place that was holy to her. He lit incense and transforming into panther-form caught some rodents on the grounds and laid them on the altar. He poured expensive wine of his own stock over them and sung softly to himself, preparing the sacrifice to pay for his divination casting.

“Oh, great queen Bast,” Roland knelt before her altar and held his outstretched arms to the ceiling. “Please look down on me your humble servant and let me beg your wisdom. Your eyes see the smallest mouse that nibbles in the field, even as your roar can shake the foundations of Aquerra, please tell me what benefit it would be to seek the Key Room to Hurgun’s Maze? Or would it be our doom and failure?”

¹⁰² Kazrack has been carving stone King’s Men pieces in his free time throughout most of the campaign.

Roland fell prostrate and his body became rigid as he heard the purred whispered voice breathed into his ear ... Though it will bring you within a whisker's breadth of failure, what can be gained there may bring you a rousing success...

At lunch, Roland told them of his answer, and the group immediately fell to arguing as Richard and Razzle laughed and mocked. They were gathered on the cracked floor eating some pigeons that Ratchis and Logan brought back, washing it down with wine.

"We need to go to the Key Room," Roland said.

"Bah! The vision my gods sent me proves that we do not," Kazrack said. "Even the answer you gained warns of the folly of it. 'A whisker's breadth' is very close to failure, and thus it is likely we would fail."

"It does not say we will fail," Roland retorted. "I take it to mean we will succeed."

"Rubbish," Kazrack said.

"If anything, the white buildings you saw rising from the earth proves that the Key Room actually does something," Roland reasoned. "Meaning it may be necessary for us to do it and we are lucky that we are the only ones who know where the entrance is in that fortress, or whatever it is."

Kazrack was silent for a long time.

"D'naar, what do you think?" the dwarf finally said, turning to his half-orc companion.

"I think Roland has a point about the buildings, but while it may be necessary for anyone else to get in, it may not be necessary for us, with our knowledge," Ratchis said.

"Oh, great Bast!" Roland swore. "Am I the only one who sees clearly around here? The Key Room and the beam of light complement each other! It will make getting in easier for use while other forces seek their own entrance or to stop us from making ours!"

"I only wish you could ask your goddess again and pose a different question," Kazrack said. "Maybe you would get a better answer with a better question. My people are well-schooled in the lore of divination, you should have consulted me."

Roland covered his mouth with his left hand and swallowed his response. Taking a deep breath, he finally responded. "It would be nice, but it is disrespectful for me to go to her again like this so soon. I am supposed to make decisions on my own."

Kazrack's brow furrowed and his eyebrows lowered as he studied the Bastite, unsure how to take that last comment.

The argument went on interminably. Finally, Martin went back to his studies with Richard, and Ratchis and Logan went out to do more scouting, while Dorn wandered off with Cordell to explore the catacombs some. Razzle had climbed on the roof and was practicing drawing and sheathing his sword mid-cartwheel. Roland and Kazrack were so engrossed with the debate they were oblivious to all else. It went on for hours.

"The problem with continuing this discussion is the problem of a conflict between the words of my god and the words of yours," Roland said. "However, my emotional reaction to this..."

"Emotional? What are you, a woman?" Kazrack was genuinely shocked. "Be a man and use your reason."

"Kazrack, if what you use is reason, then I will happily stick with my emotions," Roland replied. The Bastite stood and went outside, wondering where Norena was, as he had not seen her all day.

“She took off in cat-form this morning to do some scouting,” Richard explained to Roland a little later when asked. “She might not be back for days.”

Meanwhile, Logan and Ratchis found themselves back near Summit, creeping in the long shadows of the afternoon from ash-covered shrub to ash-covered stone across the grazing fields for the place’s many flocks of sheep and goats. It all appeared abandoned.

Despite Ratchis’ frustrated whispered hissing, Logan crept even closer, dragging himself amid roots and mud to get right to the edge of the town, and watch from the shadow of some small houses that seemed abandoned.

Aside from some poorly equipped obvious Gothanian militia, he saw about two dozen men-at-arms wandering about. It was hard to determine exactly how many from his vantage point, as they all looked similar from that distance, but he figured it was a good guess. They wore chainmail and carried long spears. Most had heavy maces at their side. They wore road-stained doublets with an embroidered rune upon the chest he could not get a good look at. Logan also noticed the two men that seemed to be the leaders. One also carried a spear and had a spear atop an ankh emblazoned upon his breast plate. The other also wore plate but carried a shield on his back with the symbol of a tome emblazoned with an ankh upon it. As he made ready to creep away from there, the Herman-lander also saw a short-haired woman in bright red robes and carrying a staff.

Logan made it back to Ratchis, and night was falling as they got to the Temple of Bast once again. Logan told the others what he saw.

“We will have to be careful to avoid them when we go to meet Gunthar tomorrow,” Ratchis said.¹⁰³ “Roland, I was hoping you might come with me.”

“Do we really have to go get Gunthar?” Roland complained.

“We need his sword, if not his mouth,” Kazrack said, and Roland sighed and nodded.

The evening was passed playing King’s Men on a makeshift board, while Martin and Richard continued the former’s training.

Anulem, the 21st of Keent – 565 H.E.

Early the day before, Ratchis and Roland headed out. The Bastite took panther-form and took point. The others stayed behind. Kazrack working on his King’s Men, Martin training, and Dorn and Logan exploring the catacombs along with Cordell of Thoth.

Without Kazrack to slow them down, Ratchis and Roland had made great time in getting to the meeting place, but as it was, the sun was making a slow descent as they arrived. They made camp and waited.

In the morning, there was no sign of Gunthar, so Roland of Bast cast a sending.

“It’s Roland. Ratchis and I are at the rendezvous point waiting for you. Please briefly respond with your location and situation. Don’t waste words on insults...”

The world seemed to go away for an instant, and Roland heard Gunthar’s voice as if from down a long narrow tunnel.

“Hey ya friggin’ ponce! Nice to distract me when I am sneaking around trying to keep Debo’s trolls from following me to where you are...”

¹⁰³ Gunthar said he would meet the rest of the party back in the determined spot in four days’ time in Session #77

Roland sighed. "There was a reply, but I got a vision of him getting eaten by trolls..." Roland began in his snarling, mewling roaring cat-language. Ratchis who had cast Speak with Animals could understand and answer back, though. Roland continued. "Okay, I am just kidding... He's coming this way and he has trolls with him."

"Do you have any idea where he might be?" Ratchis asked.

"No idea, why don't you tell me, tracker?" Roland replied.

"It has been days since he left, and it rained a lot. Even if I could find his trail there is no guarantee he is coming back the same way," Ratchis said, and then he suddenly looked up, feeling like they were being watched. He was right.

Ratchis turned and saw a slight figure standing about sixty feet away under the cover a pine that was white with ash on its needles. The man stood about five foot seven inches tall and wore all green and black, and a woolen cap. He had a sword at his side and a short bow in his hands. When he saw that Ratchis noticed him, he began to slowly walk over.

"That thing yours?" the man asked, point to Roland's panther-form as he approached. "Oh, hey! You're that pig-fucker that was around a few months ago, right?"

"Yes," Ratchis replied.

"So, that thing yours?" the man asked again.

"He is a priest of Bast," the half-orc said, wary.

"They letting panthers be priests of Bast now?" the man asked, surprised.

"No. Priests of Bast can turn into panthers," Ratchis replied.

"What? Like a were-panther?"

"No, like a priest of Bast."

"Never heard of that," the man spit and shifted his weight to one hip. "Pretty dangerous in these parts, what with the fire lizardmen and the king's goons riding around all over the place."

Ratchis nodded.

"What'cha doin' here, anyway?" the man asked.

"We are waiting for someone," Ratchis said. "But we are worried that he might be waylaid by trolls. Do you know of trolls in the area?"

"Trolls?!" the man laughed. "None that I know of. Ain't been a troll in these parts for a hunned years. So, priest of Bast, eh? I heard that old Bast place up near Summit was being used for some dark stuff and some of them dragon-hunters..." The man laughed. "...Some of them dragon-hunters roused out the evil priest that was in there. Your kitty-cat friend here to restore it or something?"

"Most likely," Ratchis replied.

"That where the rest of your friends are?" the man continued with his questioning.

"Who are you, again?" Ratchis asked.

“Oh, I’m Tyluk of Archet. I, uh... I’m a friend of Siram. You met him, right?”¹⁰⁴

“Some of my companions did, yes...” Ratchis answered, still unsure if he should be having this conversation.

“The watch-mage?” Tyluk asked.

“Do you have any more useful information about this area?” Ratchis asked, avoiding the question.

“Uh, no...” Tyluk said. “Well, I should be going.” He looked at Roland in panther-form. “You can understand me?”

The panther’s head bobbed up and down.

“Wow...” And with the man went slinking back off into the woods.

“Can you do another sending? We should not linger here too long,” Ratchis turned to the panther.

The panther’s head shook back and forth. They would have to wait another day.

Ralem, the 22nd of Keent – 565 H.E.¹⁰⁵

Soon after praying, Roland sent another sending to Gunthar.

“Hey buffoon, we need to return to the temple of Bast near Summit. Good luck with the trolls! Meet us at the temple. Need help? Tell me where?”

The answer came like a wind through a reed.

“Hey Cheese-puss, Debo double-crossed me. Still over a day away. I’ll try to meet you at the temple.”

Roland relayed this to Ratchis, and they made their way north once again to return to the temple.

As Ratchis and Roland made the long hike back and the sun reached its apex, a bored Logan found himself on the roof of the temple of Bast, just keeping a look out, and occasionally spying on Martin and Richard through the skylight as they studied in the main chamber. But then he thought he heard a whinny brought to his ear on the wind. He stood and shielded his eyes and could see horses appearing on the ridge from the south. There were armored men making their way towards the temple. He saw other men on foot coming up the ridge south of where the party had a few days before.

Logan scrambled over to the skylight.

“Hsst! Ra-worshippers! Soldiers. Headed this way!” he hissed down to those below.

“Cordell is below!” Razzle said, moving to the vestry where the stairs to the lower levels were. “I will go get him.”

“I wonder who it is? I guess I’ll find out,” said Richard, and promptly faded away.

Frantic, Martin ran for the vestry, but then doubled back to scoop up his spellbooks and scrolls and bring them with him.

¹⁰⁴ See Session #29

¹⁰⁵ Kazrack’s birthday. This marks one year in-game time since the campaign began.

“Louis! Take the left flank,” an authoritative voice barked outside, as the sound of armored men enveloped the area. “Warren! Take the right! Suel, up the middle!”

After a moment, Logan heard the soldiers at the temple door below him. He was lying flat on the roof, nearly holding his breath.

“The door is secured, sir,” said a soldier.

“Hello? Hello?” the leader’s voice called through the door. “In the name of the Kingdom of Gothanius and the Company of the Impervious Ward, show yourselves!”

Thoom! Thoom! Thoom! The hammering of the mailed fist against the temple door echoed in the main chamber, and frightened that the soldiers would come in, Martin the Green finally hurried down the stairs of the vestry to the lower level. A brick-walled hallway led into series of smaller chambers which included a kitchen, a larder and two storage rooms. Two halls reached back to where the catacombs and then more natural tunnels wound out within and beneath the ridge wall.

Unsure of which way to go, Martin guessed to the left and was happy to see Dorn coming back up the hall in his direction, oblivious to what was going on above.

“Go back! Take me to Kazrack!” Martin said to the cohort. “The mercenaries are here. They’ll enter the temple at any moment if they haven’t already!”

Shocked, Dorn led Martin back down the short hall through a thick wooden door past the niches for the dead on either side and then through a narrow archway to the natural tunnels. It took a good ten minutes for the two of them to make to the cavern where the dwarf was still diligently carving his small pieces of stone.

“Can you use your invisibility to sneak past them?” Kazrack asked when Martin explained the situation. They began to march back towards the catacomb doors to listen. “We need to reach D’nar and Roland.”

“They have a wizard with them,” Martin replied, burying his face in his right hand. “There is no guarantee that I can slip by them unseen or unnoticed. If they are as trained to deal with wizards as Finn said they claim to be, they will be prepared for just such a scenario.”

“Then we fight,” Kazrack replied. “Better to fight than to be taken prisoner.”

“Without Ratchis and Roland or Gunthar or Logan here? Kazrack, you will die if we go up there and fight them on our own.”

“Me, but not you?” Kazrack asked.

“They have orders to take me alive,” Martin said, quietly.

“Then as I keep them busy you can flee invisibly and try to find Ratchis and Roland,” Kazrack suggested.

“What about Logan?” Dorn asked.

“Logan can take care of himself,” Kazrack replied. “Either he has been killed or captured already, or he has gotten away. Let’s hope he can get to D’nar before he stumbles back into a trap. But what about Richard and his companions?”

Martin explained that Richard had disappeared, and that Razzle had come down here to find Cordell.

“They must have taken the other hallway to the other set of catacombs,” Dorn said. “I have been exploring this side mostly, but Cordell spends time in other. There are fewer catacombs on that side, but some very deep shafts.”

“Do they connect?” Kazrack asked.

“They may, but Cordell seemed to think there might be a way to get from one set of catacombs to the other in a very deep place,” Dorn said.

“You know, Norena has been gone for a day, perhaps she went and alerted these soldiers to your presence here, Martin,” Kazrack said.

“Unlikely,” Martin replied. “What would that get her?”

“Perhaps she and Richard thought that if these mercenaries arrived, we would be forced to go into the Key Room to escape?” Kazrack speculated.

Martin shook his head. “We don’t even know where the portal is.”

“I do,” replied Dorn. “Cordell showed me the hatch that goes down to it, but he warned me that it was warded with a spell.”

“If the soldiers have not made it to the larder when we get up there, we will go to the other hall and find Cordell and Razzle,” Martin said. “As a priest of Thoth, perhaps Cordell can help negotiate a truce of some kind.”

“Or he may aid the paladin of his god,” Kazrack said.

“Again, I don’t see that working in his interest in terms of his goals with Richard,” Martin said. “In either case, we have to risk it.”

Meanwhile, Logan was still on the temple roof. He heard the soldiers burst through the temple doors yelling to each other that the main chamber was clear. And he could hear others making a perimeter about the unkempt temple grounds as well.

“They’ve escaped to the lower levels, sir,” Logan heard a voice report through the broken skylight. The commander gave orders coolly, sending a unit to search below, while another was sent outside to do a quick search of the perimeter.

There was the sound of something cutting through the air, and suddenly there was a crimson figure rising over the temple from beneath the ridge. It was a woman in red robes with close-trimmed curly red hair. She held a staff in one hand.

“There is someone on the roof!” she cried, looking down and seeing Logan crouched there. “Stand down and prepare to be questioned!”

Logan did not comply. He ran for the far edge of the roof and dove off, twisting and flipping in the air to land on his feet and hustle into the nettle-choked woods that surrounded the temple grounds to the west and north.

“There is one out here! There is one out here!” He heard soldiers’ voices calling to each other, and the zip of crossbow bolts cutting past him and biting into the earth. As Logan crouched down and dove into the thick trees, he heard the flying mage hiss arcane words, and he felt the bite of arrows of glowing light in his back. A javelin rattled against a branch above his head, but soon he was out of their view.

“Regroup! Regroup!” Logan heard another voice commanding. “Hold the perimeter. He can’t go far if his companions are still inside. He will have to come back.”

Logan remained hidden beneath a bush a few hundred yards away from the temple and cursed.

Martin sent his arcane eye out into the kitchen and larder and spied the chain-garbed soldiers coming into the room and spreading out at the command of one of the lieutenants.

“We need to retreat!” Martin hissed to Kazrack and Dorn, when he saw three soldiers coming down the hall to the catacombs. The three of them hurried back down as quickly and quietly as they could.

“We need to find the Black Door and go to this Key Room,” Martin said. “This may be our only opportunity.”

“I still think we can make it out,” said Kazrack.

“We can’t risk it,” Martin said. “Dorn, show us where the hatch is.”

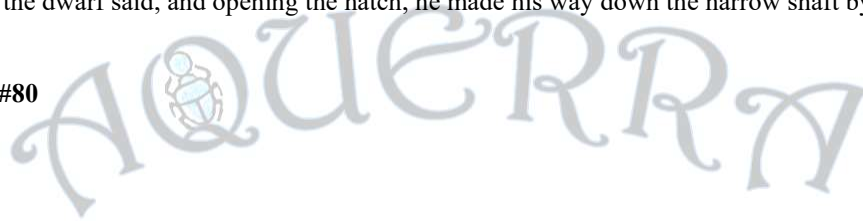
Down into the depths of the earth they marched. Martin the Green invoked the rune of light upon the medallion he wore about his neck to light their way. Dorn was in the lead, taking them down narrow winding steps of random lengths and heights, and through several dirt tunnels, past many more caverns, to a narrow place where a metal hatch capped a hole in black volcanic rock.

“There is a glyph of warding on that hatch,” Martin said, scanning it with a detect magic spell.

Kazrack Delver grabbed the bag of runestones about his neck and called to Lehrothronar to undo the protective magic, and the glyph faded.

“I will go first,” the dwarf said, and opening the hatch, he made his way down the narrow shaft by means of a metal ladder.

End of Session #80



Session #81

The black brackish water in the narrow corridor below came up to Kazrack's knee. Something bumped against his leg, and he could see that pieces of bone with still rotting flesh on them floated here or there. There were more empty niches for the dead high up on either side of the wall. Metal doors book-ended the corridor. Martin the Green came down next and Dorn followed. They went to the left and found the large metal door there to be untrapped and easily opened.

Beyond was a room that was about forty feet by eighty feet, and on the far wall they could see the black stone border of some kind of archway or portal etched with golden runes. But the passageway and the runes were obscured by hundreds of pounds of dirt and stone, blocking the way.

"Could this be an illusion?" Kazrack asked.

Martin shook his head. "I don't think so."

"I remember long ago Finn saying that the evil priest had been using his captives to dig for the door," Kazrack said. "I thought he had gotten closer than this."¹⁰⁶

"If I remember correctly, they spent some time covering the portal back up," Martin said.

"It will take a long time to uncover all of this," Kazrack said. "Let's go check the door on the other side."

The other door had a ward upon it as well, and they had no way to dispel it this time.

"Well, this settles it," Kazrack said. "We need to go above and do what we can to get past or defeat those mercenaries."

Martin shook his head. "That is a bad idea, Kazrack."

"And if Roland and D'nar return and are captured? What then?"

"That is unlikely to happen," Martin explained. "Ratchis is too deft a woodsman and tracker to not notice the guards, and even if he did not notice, Roland would smell them, and Logan is probably trying to meet up with them as we speak, so he will warn them regardless."

"So, we just wait?" Kazrack frowned.

"We wait for Roland to contact us magically, that way we can come up with some kind of rudimentary plan to deal with the situation. In the meantime, I suggest we climb back up to the tunnels and explore and map them the best we can while we wait."

Kazrack reluctantly agreed.

As the afternoon grew long, Logan Naismith crept southward keeping a look out for Roland and Ratchis. Eventually, half a dozen miles from the temple, Roland caught a whiff of the Herman-lander's scent on the wind and hurried ahead bursting through the brush to surprise his companion. He nearly got a sword blow to the face for that.

"This is no time for playing," Logan told the panther.

"Those mercenaries I saw in the village have taken possession of the temple," Logan explained when Ratchis had caught up to them. "About thirty soldiers, a wizard and two priests."

¹⁰⁶ See session #50

“Where are the others?” Ratchis asked.

“In the catacombs,” Logan replied. “I didn’t like the idea of being trapped down there so I stayed where I was until I was spotted and then came to find you. Why isn’t Gunthar with you?”

“Because he is a moron,” Roland replied, transforming back into human form in order to take part in the conversation.

“Did they attack?” Ratchis asked.

“Sure as hell, they did,” Logan replied. “Me, anyway. Luckily, those soldiers are really bad shots, but the sorceress hit me with some spell as I fled the place.”

“And Richard and his companions?” Roland asked.

“Norena never came back, and I guess the rest of them are down in the catacombs as well, but if they are with Martin, Kazrack or Dorn, I have no idea.”

They decided to get closer to the temple of Bast and scope out the situation. Roland transformed back into panther-form, guessing that the Company of the Impervious Ward may not have learned that the Keepers of the Gate had a Bastite among them.

They came around from the western side of the temple where the trees were thickest, and most covered in the ash still occasionally billowing out of Greenreed Valley. Roland took point, creeping beneath the brush a few score yards ahead of Logan and Ratchis. He smelled someone ahead to the left and then heard voices, so he flattened his feline body down and pulled himself quietly through the brush towards whoever it was.

He came upon a tall man in green dusty cloak and studded leather, holding a staff talking with a smaller younger man who also wore studded leather and a leather cap. The younger man’s back was to Roland, so the Bastite could not see his face, but there was something vaguely familiar about his voice.

“I thought you said I would have gotten my money by now. I thought you said I could trust these Neergaardians...” the young man was saying. Roland could sense a bit of fear and apprehension in the man’s voice. “So, they’re not gonna hurt them or anything, right? I don’t have anything against them. I just needed the money...”

“Yeah, right... Just shut up already,” the other man replied, his eyes shifting from side to side. “I thought I heard something.”

Roland froze. After a few moments, the older man, who appeared to be some kind of scout took off towards the temple, but the younger man remained behind. Roland could now see that there was small camp here in the clearing. The young man moved over to the other side of the shallow pit where a fire had clearly been the night before and sat on a stump. He had shaggy brown hair and a weaselly face. Roland recognized him as one of the Shepherds but could not remember his name.

The Bastite crept back to his companions and explained what he saw.

“So, one of Richard’s little friends sold us out,” Logan spat.

“We’ll get the story from him,” Ratchis said. “But we’ll wait for nightfall, and no killing.” The half-orc looked at Logan.

They made their way further north and west and waited for Ra’s Glory to sink behind the valley, and then crept down towards the small camp. Roland went in first, and the scout, whoever he was, was not around. The Bastite growled a spell attempting to hold the young man where he stood feeding twigs to a fire, but the spell failed. He looked up and saw the panther and backed away.

“Uh, hello Mister Cat,” the young man said, as Roland crept further into the clearing. “Not afraid of fire? Are you like, uh... a magical cat? Can you talk?”

Roland growled in response.

“Why not leave me alone, Mister Magical Cat?” he backed to the edge of the clearing and pulled something down over his eyes. Roland leapt at him, and the young man turned and ran through the trees, dodging root, and branch deftly despite the darkness.

“Help! Help!” he cried as he ran down the sloping ridge, the panther on his heels. Roland leapt upon him and the two of them tumbled painfully another thirty feet before coming to a stop with the Bastite holding the young man down, jaws about his neck.

“Mister Cat! Mister Cat! Ah! Who are you?”

“Yell again, you little bastard, and you’ll be singing soprano,” Logan said. He had made his way down the slope, sword drawn.

“But... But... But...”

Ratchis walked over from the south where he had been waiting to cut him off if needed. He looked down at the captive and snorted his disgust. It was Josef Barley-grinder.

“Gag him,” the half-orc said.

“Ratchis!” Josef said, but that was all he got out clearly. Logan jammed a rag into the young rogue’s mouth. “Raffchiff! Riff muh! Rofef! Dish ish uh mushtaesh!”

“Let’s get further away in case the scout comes back,” Ratchis said, turning and marching southwest. “Bring him.”

Logan grabbed Josef by the cloak and dragged him up to his feet once Roland got off of him.

“What’s this?” Logan asked as he pulled a pair of brown lenses with cupped metal frames and a leather strap off of Josef’s head. They were goggles. He dropped the young man to the ground again and slipped them on. The night became a world of gray tones, that allowed Logan to see pretty clearly. “Hey! These are magical! No wonder he didn’t stumble in the dark.”

Logan dragged Josef along behind him, enjoying the goggles’ effect.

“You’re a priest of Nephthys! You’re not supposed to capture people!” Josef accused when they finally ungagged him about a half mile away from where he had been captured. They had tied his hands behind his back and placed him with his back to a tree.

“We’re only going to hold you for a little while,” Ratchis replied, curtly.

“How much did they pay you?” Logan asked.

“Pay me? I, uh... I don’t know what you’re talking about...” Josef replied.

“Roland saw you talking to their tracker. Drop the act,” Logan replied.

“How much?” Ratchis asked.

“Uh... Two hundred pieces of silver,” Josef replied, meekly. “But... But they haven’t paid me.”

"So that's the price you put on betraying someone who saved your life?" Ratchis asked, disgusted.

"They weren't gonna kill him! They were just gonna take him to see the king," Josef said by way of excuse.

"What about the rest of us, you little shit?" Logan barked, kicking the young man in the ribs.

Ratchis held his arm out in front of Logan to hold him back.

"Betraying your friends and not even bright enough to get paid for it," Logan swore. "This kid makes me sick."

"I'm sorry," Josef said. Ratchis had to keep Logan from kicking him again.

"What do you think Finn and Carlos would say?" Ratchis asked.

"They don't see things the same, I guess," Josef replied. "I want to get out of here. I wanted to make my way back to the coast and buy passage on a ship back to Herman Land, or maybe Thricia... Are you going to let me go?"

"Let you go? We should run you through!" Logan sneered.

"We'll let you go at dawn," Ratchis said.

"He'll go back to the temple and warn them!" Logan said.

"I won't do that! I promise," Josef cried.

"Keep it down!" Ratchis barked, and then turned to Logan. "He will go back to town and continue to help the others, and if we find him near the temple again or talking to any of this mercenary band, then I'll leave it to you to handle it. In the meantime, keep those goggles, you can use them, and consider them payment for not killing him."

"But those are mine!" Josef whined. "I got them off the evil priest when we saved the captured townspeople!"

"Count yourself lucky that is all we take," Ratchis snapped back. "I will make sure you get them back when this is all said and done."

Logan smirked.

Deep beneath the temple of Bast, Martin, Kazrack and Dorn found an isolated spot in a larger cavern, above ground level and made camp the best they could. They took turns watching as the others slept.

Isilem, the 23rd of Keent – 565 H.E.

There was no way to know for certain that morning had come down in the tunnels beneath the temple, but Kazrack prayed and prepared his spells, as Martin the Green did as well; Dorn watching over them.

"I'm getting us out of here," Kazrack said when they were done.

"I'm really sorry," Josef said as they cut him free. "I didn't know it would turn out this way."

"Just go back to town and remain loyal to Finn and Carlos," Ratchis reminded the young man. "When we are done here, we will do what we can to help you go wherever it is you want to go."

Josef nodded and then took off towards Summit.

“You let him off easy,” Logan said.

“We are not all granted the same strength,” Ratchis said. “And Nephthys teaches that we should have compassion even to those that wrong us so they may learn the strength of doing good.”

Roland and Ratchis discussed what spells to prepare, and the Bastite informed the friar that he planned to use a sending to contact Norena first, in hopes of getting her aid.

”What’s your situation? Where’s Richard? Josef sold Martin out. Need to get rid of hunters. Am with Ratchis and Logan south of temple. Reply.”

Like the cry of whippoorwill, Norena’s voice came back half a moment later, whispered in Roland’s ear: “Scouting orc army approach. No idea where Richard is. Will send him a message. Who’s Josef? Which hunters? What do you want from me?”

“Well, that was useless,” Roland sighed. He recounted what Norena had answered.

“If Kazrack and Martin are not captured and are still down in the catacombs, how long do you think they’ll wait?” Roland asked.

“I think Martin and Kazrack are smart enough to wait for us to contact them somehow before making a move,” Ratchis replied.

“Well, Martin is...” Logan said.

“I can’t speak for Kazrack. His decision-making processes are inscrutable to me,” Roland said. “He can do anything and have a reason for it.”

“There seems to be some logic there, I just haven’t figured it out yet,” Logan said.

“Kazrack is logical,” Ratchis said. “It is just that he thinks in absolutes.”

“Maybe they will find another way out,” Logan said. “If there are natural caves down there it stands to reason there will be more than one way out.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean it would be easy to find, easy to access, or not many leagues away,” Ratchis said. “I just hope Gunthar gets back soon. We can use his help, and I want to cut him off before he goes stumbling into a temple full of enemies.”

“Ah, forget him,” Logan said.

“Gunthar has helped us time and again. It would not be right to let him fall into a trap,” Ratchis said. “We will make our way north of the temple and look for a place where we can spy it from above.”

“Shall I contact Martin with my remaining sending and let him know the situation?” Roland asked.

“Hold off,” the half-orc said. “I think we may need to contact Gunthar again, but if we wait until later in the day, we can save the spell in case something changes.”

Roland nodded.

“If the soldiers are still at the temple when we get there then it is likely they have not captured Martin or Kazrack,” Ratchis continued. “They can stay safe in the catacombs until we figure out a way to get them out.”

The three members of the Keepers of the Gate made a wide circle westward and then northeastward again, climbing to the rocky plateaus where the ridge met the black flinty foothills of Gothanius’ northern border.

“This looks like it might be a good place,” Kazrack said, as he and Martin the Green and Dorn entered a nearly conical cavern at the end of a series of caverns off a broad natural corridor they thought might lead to the surface. “We are close to the surface here. I can tell.”

Martin the Green cast levitation on Kazrack and sent him to the cavern ceiling nearly fifty feet up. Floating there, the dwarven rune-thrower called upon his gods to soften earth and stone. There was crack as tons of sand, earth and stone came raining down into the chamber. Martin quickly lowered Kazrack and the three of them hurried back to the entrance of the cavern waiting for the dust to settle. There was now a ragged shaft winding up about six feet where the depth Kazrack had cleared away revealed an open space beyond. The hole still dropped the occasional rock, and transmuted stone dripped as wet clay, like drool from a lazy mouth. There was still tons of stone beyond before the surface could be reached.

This process was repeated twice more, but after the third time, the three members of the Keepers of the Gate were forced to retreat back even further, fleeing for their lives as a chain reaction of stone and mud came sliding down into the cavern, erupting into a cloud of acrid dust.

They waited for a long time in another cavern a few hundred yards down another natural corridor. Plumes of dust roiled even this far, and they coughed as they waited. Finally, thinking it had cleared enough and wanting to see if they might be able to reach the surface now, they marched back to the collapsed cavern.

However, as they approached the cavern there was a sound like a stamp and a snort, and the light of Martin’s medallion revealed a hulking form of black stone charging in their direction. It was in the shape of a great boar, nearly five feet at the shoulder, and its dense body nearly twelve feet long. It rushed right into Kazrack, knocking the dwarf back, his breast plate crunching painfully.

Dorn stepped back and loaded his crossbow letting an ineffectual bolt go.

“By the gods! What manner of creature is this?” Kazrack yelled, bring his halberd to bare.

“*Sagitta Igneus!*” Martin chanted and two arrows of flame rushed from his outstretched hand. One flew high as dust flew into the watch-mage’s eye, but the second struck the beast in the flank, scorching its stone body. “It is an elemental of some kind!”

“What could be causing that?” Logan asked Ratchis as they stood a few hundred yards south of the temporary camp they had made north of the temple. Roland was back at the camp. It was situated atop the higher portion of the ridge, which the temple was built in the shadow of. Ratchis and Logan could see a plume of brown dust roiling high up into the air from the eastern side of the valley wall, and the small figures of mercenaries moving to stand watch over it from their part of the ridge wall.

“I think it is time to have Roland contact the others,” Ratchis said. “You stay hidden here and keep watch on what the mercenaries do. I’ll be back.”

Kazrack’s bellow echoed in the cavern as he slapped the blade of his halberd against the earthen dire boar’s tusks, wedging the shaft between them to pivot its head and break its charge. Another bolt from Dorn’s crossbow snapped ineffectually against its stony head.

There was a hiss as a red glow appeared in the roiling dust. A stony worm whose segments burned orange-white with heat squirmed from the other direction.

“Thoqqua!” Martin warned the others.

“Kazrack, we have another kind of something back here,” Dorn said, reloading his crossbow. He leapt to avoid the worm’s head as it sprang at him. The bolt hissed as it buried itself between two of its rings, bursting aflame.

Kazrack grunted, as he fought to keep the boar at bay and avoid it crushing him.

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted and the molten-worm slowed its squirming. The watch-mage then cried out as he barely leapt out of the way of the broad bronze blade of a sword swinging out of the darkness of the cavern wall beside him. The blade sliced his robes and he felt the skin scraped from his right shoulder. There was a reptilian humanoid with dark green and black scales and a thick boney crest atop its head. It wore a leather belt with a scabbard and pouches, and had a dark brown cloak hanging from a black chain about its neck. The chain held three gemstones. The flanking two stones were bright blue with white stars on their surface, while the central one was a ruby with a similar marking. The new foe’s scales shimmered with speckles the same brown as the cavern walls and floor.

“Glacht es tassar!” the reptilian attacker hissed “Try and get the eggs, will you?”

“Are these creatures summoned then?” Kazrack asked, turning to notice the new foe, but allowing the elemental boar past him. It slammed into Martin and the watch-mage stumbled back, blood bursting from his nose as his left eye grew black. The dwarf carved a wedge in the boar’s flank as it went past him.

“We don’t know anything about any eggs!” Martin said to the creature. He had tried to cast a spell, but the boar had ruined the incantation. He gagged and felt a wave of fatigue as a disgusting stench erupted from the reptilian thing as it put some distance between itself and Kazrack, giving the elemental room to spin about. He sliced Martin’s chest with his sword as he stepped back, saliva dripping off one of his green-crusting fangs.

“Defiler of Hurgun!” the creature accused.

The boar slammed into both Dorn and Kazrack as it came around. Dorn cried out as he stepped back into the thooqua. The leg of his pants burst into flame and he began to frantically beat at it.

“Good creature! We know nothing of any eggs,” Martin managed to choke out. “We sought only to escape this place. I implore you, call off your attack!”

“Make a sacrifice for the earth-god,” the thing hissed, stepping back even further.

Kazrack slammed the blade of his halberd into the elemental boar’s head, and it exploded, sending shards of stone in all directions. The rest of it fell into a pile of dirt. The dwarf spun on the worm and sliced it in half. It hissed and disappeared. The reptilian attacker stepped back into the darkness and was gone.

“Martin, if you can stop that creature, stop him anyway you can. He may bring others,” Kazrack said.

“We have no interest in fighting you or harming your eggs!” Martin the Green called after it. “We have no wish to harm any of your people! Come back! We would speak to you of Hurgun!”

Kazrack sighed. “Let us try and finish our job and get out of here before that thing returns.” He laid a hand on Dorn and healed his burns.

The three Keepers of the Gate made their way to the chamber and examined the rent in the earth above them. Kazrack climbed up the pile of earthen rubble and stone to see that something was blocking the passage he had created. A large pine tree was askew about three quarters of the way up, with more stone and earth trapped behind it. In a few spots, sunlight came through small gaps, when the dust cleared enough to allow it, but occasionally there was another slide of earth and stone that kicked up more clouds.

“There is a lot of earth and stone that has to come out that small hole,” Martin said, looking up. “I don’t think this going to work.”

“Leave it to me,” Kazrack said. “A few more spells and we’ll be out of here.”

Suddenly there was a sound like the rushing of wind in Martin's ear and his awareness shrunk down to a pinpoint of light through which he heard Roland's voice like a tinny echo.

"Ridge collapsing northeast of temple. Soldiers watching. Logan, Ratchis waiting north of temple for Gunthar. Norena scouting approaching orc army. Message tomorrow to coordinate rescue."

"Deep underground with Dorn, Kazrack" Martin replied by means of the spell. "Can't find others. Escaped soldiers. Kazrack magically digging exit caused collapse. Encountering lizardfolk, elementals, Hurgun mentioned. Will await messages tomorrow."

"We have to wait for tomorrow anyway," Kazrack said when Martin relayed to him and Dorn what Roland's *sending* had said. "I miscalculated how many spells it would take."

Martin looked at the many cracks that spidered out from the hole, riddling the wall to their right, where some large pieces of stones had also fallen from.

"Do you think that is a good idea?" Martin asked. "It seems it was this tunneling that angered that lizard creature."

"If there is some reason, we should not do it, let this creature tell us in a civilized manner rather than attack us like some base rogue," Kazrack replied. "Anyway, we need to get out of here, and the only other way is blocked by soldiers."

Martin the Green nodded.

"Lizardfolk? What is he talking about?" Logan asked Roland and Ratchis, when he returned from his watch and they told him what Martin has said.

Roland shrugged.

Osilem, the 24th of Keent – 565 H.E.

Martin the Green sent his invisible arcane eye through the crack in the cavern that had widened even more while he, Kazrack and Dorn rested the night in a more distant room. Kazrack was examining the main attempt at tunneling, trying to figure out the best way to collapse the whole side of the ridge, hoping he'd take out any nearby soldiers in the process. Dorn stood guard with loaded crossbow; the medallion about his neck shining its light like a beacon.

Not too far beyond the crack Martin spied an adjacent chamber. It was much lower than the digging room, and the eye sunk quickly to see its rounded base with a great fire in the center atop a raised dais of stone that was round as well, being in perfect proportion to the room. He could see that the walls were carved to create narrow cascading rows of balconies reached by a honeycomb of narrow passages.

On one side of the round dais kneeled the reptilian priest, his scales shimmered orange red and blue as the fire crackled before him, devouring huge clumps of coal. Across from him was a set of stone double-doors carved with many runes. They stood ajar, so Martin had his eye zoom down the hallway beyond. The passage was only seven feet wide and about as high, but it was definitely wider than the other passages leading from the balconies. The corridor sunk deeper into the earth and led to midway up the side of the wall of another round chamber. This one was much deeper, and had cascading niches all down the sides, each niche holding a glowing coal-stone and a speckled egg about the size of two human fists.

Kazrack called to his gods and healed all the wounds he suffered when fighting the elemental the day before.

Martin described what he had seen.

“If we are delayed in getting to Hurgun’s Maze because of this, those eggs shall be endangered anyway,” Kazrack said. “But I will try to make our tunneling not affect that chamber.”

“It is worth the risk?” Martin asked in his typical worried tone.

“Yes. The thing is just a monster. We cannot hold its nest above our need to save Derome-Delem,” the dwarf replied. “Now please levitate me up so I can reach obscured area that holds that tree in place. I think if I soften the area around it, that whole curved portion will shift and create a more vertical tunnel.”

Martin sighed and nodded, but suddenly there was another sending from Roland.

“One soldier watches. Wait until dark. We’ll be at base of ridge. Can escape together. Gunthar missing. We will contact him. Give Kazrack big hug.”

“Can’t tell time underground,” Martin replied. “No idea when night falls. Lizardfolk threatens. Will escape next hour and hourly thereafter. Good luck. See you soon.”

“How can he tell an hour’s passed but he can’t tell when nightfall is?” Logan swore.

End of Session #81



Session #82

"I still think we should seek out that lizardfolk and negotiate with him," Martin the Green said, even as he concentrated to send Kazrack up into the cracked ceiling with a levitation spell. It had been about an hour since they had communicated with Roland, or so they guessed. "He may know another way out. He may have information we need about Hurgun's Maze."

Kazrack did not respond but held the pouch of runestones about his neck and chanted in the tongue of his people, "Lehrothronar, please let me soften this earth so it does as little damage to this cavern as possible and help free us to do this task the gods have assigned to us."

Tons of earth and sand came rushing down once more, and Martin lowered a coughing Kazrack and they retreated once again. There was a resounding crack, as large portions of the north and east walls of the chamber came thundering down. The three Keepers of the Gate doubled their pace as they noticed cracks stretching out above them just before they were enveloped by a cloud of brown dust.

Logan saw the plume of dust coming from the crack in ridge explode into life, showering the area with small stones and making the spot visible for many miles. He could hear the muted cries of alarm from the soldiers about it, and he could see their shining forms hurrying back. The crack was so loud, Roland and Ratchis heard it back at the camp, and they both hurried to get a look at what was happening; Roland taking a moment to change into panther-form.

The small circular crack had become a rent down the side of the ridge, and more portions of it were collapsing all the time, making it seem like it was storming beneath the earth. There was soon a jagged scar that ran down the side of the ridge that looked very deep in places.

Two soldiers were hurrying back up the ridge to the temple, while two others kept watch over the holes. It was not getting any bigger, but there was still a steady plume of dust coming up and the occasional rumbling of earth.

A few moments later there was a red flash, as the figure of the female wizard came flying out of the temple, staff in hand. She wore her hair closely cropped and had a plain face. She hovered over the rent in the earth, obviously examining it. She sent a small globe of light to dance about amid its crags. It was occasionally blocked as it moved through the plume.

"I say we take her out right now from here," Logan said, fingering an arrow in the bow Ratchis had lent him, but he did not raise it.

"Do you have any more sendings?" Ratchis turned to Roland and hissed.

"Mrowr?" the panther turned his head.

"Can you speak? Can you cast it in that form? If not change back and tell them not to come up the hole, the mage is over the hole!"

"There's light!" Kazrack choked, pointing to where the crack was in the ceiling. The area that had once been the wall to their right was now several hundred feet below them and roiling with dust. Breathing was difficult. "Let us get over there and I will carry you as you raise us out."

"Are you strong enough to carry me?" Martin covered his mouth with a handkerchief.

"I am strong enough to carry both of you," Kazrack said, looking at Dorn. "And I mean to."

There was another shudder of the earth and their view of the crack was obscured again, and they were forced further away by more falling rock.

“Martin,” Roland’s voice was ice-cold in Martin’s mind. “We’re one hundred and twenty feet up the slope, meanwhile enemy mage hovers over the hole. Are you prepared for us to attack her?”

“Stay hidden. We’ll wait one hour for aftershocks and mage’s flying spell to end, then we’ll emerge. If they come down, we’ll try and hide.”

“Logan, can you read?” Ratchis asked and the young Herman-lander nodded. The half-orc pointed to the crude letters the panther had just scratched in the earth. “What’s that say?”

“Wait one hour,” Logan read aloud and spat.

Ratchis grunted his disapproval.

“I didn’t think you were going to bring so much down,” Martin chastised Kazrack. “So much for the egg chamber.”

“I had to do what I had to do in hopes of getting as many of the soldiers around the hole as possible,” Kazrack said.

”I do not think you got any,” Martin replied.

“I had to try,” the dwarf said again.

After a time, they made their way back carefully to where the hole in the ridge was, and now they could seem light more clearly coming from several places, but mostly from a ragged, uneven hole about one hundred feet above them.

Suddenly there was a voice from above. “Martin the Green! Martin the Green! We know you are down there! Parley!”¹⁰⁷

It was a man’s voice.

From their hidden perch above, Logan and Ratchis watched more soldiers go down to the hole, including two heavily armored men they took for the leaders.

“This is bad,” Logan said. “They are waiting. We should kill them now when they least expect it. You know that is where this is going, that is where these kinds of things always go, for better or worse, and that’s killing.”

“We should hide!” Martin hissed when the voice came booming down.

“We should parley,” Kazrack replied. Martin’s eyes opened wide, amazed at how quickly the typically stubborn dwarf appeared to change his mind.

“If they will listen to reason, we have to try,” Kazrack said. “We had no reason to think they would parley before.”

“But what if they use magic to charm or bind us?” Dorn offered. “They might not really know where we are. It could be a bluff.”

“They would have to see us to cast a spell on us,” Martin said. “And we can stand away from the hole where our voices would carry to them, but still not be easily pinpointed.”

Kazrack nodded. The three of them moved off to one side, where they could see the rent in the earth above them but could not be seen.

“We are ready to parley!” Kazrack called, cupping his hands about his mouth to project his voice. Bits of earth and stone rained down from the hole due to the vibrations, and Dorn and Martin tensed up.

¹⁰⁷ **DM’s Note:** Martin isn’t the only one with the arcane eye spell.

“Martin the Green?” replied the deep voice of a man.

“Who calls?” Martin cried up to the hole.

“Ancellus of Anhur, High Militant of the Company of the Impervious Ward,” the warrior-priest called back. “Give yourselves up!”

“If that’s what they mean by parleying this is going to get us nowhere,” Dorn sighed.

“You are in the employ of the king of Gothanius?” Martin asked back.

“Yes!”

“No good way out of this one,” Martin whispered as an aside to his companions. He called up once more. “And you consider King Brevelan III to be the rightful ruler of this kingdom?”

“If not his majesty, then who?” the militant of Anhur called back. “He is the rightful sovereign of this kingdom, supported by his subjects and by the glory of Ra. We are to bring you back to face his justice, and you only make it worse for yourself by resisting. We do not want to take extreme measures to retrieve you, but we shall if we must. Remember, you are the only one we need bring back alive.”

“And if I agree to return with you to Twelve Trolls, I will be free to go once I have seen the king?” Martin asked.

“If you are not guilty...”

“What are the charges?”

The militant cleared his throat and paused before listing them. “Dereliction of duty, conspiracy with foreign powers to practice sedition, and withholding evidence that was vital to the defense of Gothanius.”

And if I come with you, my companions will be free to go?” Martin called.

“We are to bring them all for questioning.”

“Sorry, but I am too busy trying to save the kingdom and the rest of Derome-Delem in my duty as watch-mage,” Martin called. “And anyway, I am not guilty of those things, so this is waste of time.”

“Whatever duties you may have to your Academy cannot come before the decree of the rightful monarch and the law,” Ancellus replied, anger creeping into his voice.

“In my station as watch-mage I can ask you to stand down,” Martin the Green, gritting his teeth with desperation.

“Whatever jurisdiction you may have had has been rescinded since there are official charges against you,” the Militant of Anhur said.

“An exception must be made in this case...” Martin began.

“The law does not bend,” the follower of Anhur replied.

Kazrack’s voice chanted in the tongue of his grandfather’s calling to Natan-ahb to soften the earth and stone at base of the rent in the earth above them. There was another thunderous crack, and Martin and Dorn and Kazrack ran for their lives as the entire ceiling came down above them.

Logan, Ratchis and Roland had watched the parley and wondered what was being said. Twice more Logan suggested acting immediately while the mercenaries were occupied and their leaders were vulnerable on the lower ridge wall, but Ratchis refused.

“They may be talking to Martin and coming to some kind of agreement,” Ratchis reasoned.

Suddenly, the scene disappeared in a plume of dust that erupted so violently they were startled. Voices cried out in dismay, as the soldiers scattered out of the plume in all direction fleeing from the widen cracks all up and down the ridge. The red-robed wizard swooped down and pulled one man to safety, while others leapt and rolled. Miraculously, the two leaders in plate mail survived, throwing themselves down the steep slope. They eventually emerged battered, but alive.

“They lost at least two, maybe even five,” Logan said, trying his best to keep careful track. “But I wouldn’t bet on more than two.”

“It is as I feared all along, we’ll have to fight our way out,” Kazrack was saying moments later as he, Dorn and Martin hurried back down the passage to the caverns closer to the catacombs and the temple.

“Why didn’t you say that before?” Dorn asked, uncharacteristically sounding annoyed.

“I thought it was assumed that we had to try another way if at all possible,” Kazrack replied. “It is unfortunate, but I may have to slay all of them.”

Martin laughed nervously.

It was nearly an hour later when they made their way back up to the catacombs and the hallway that led to the door into the kitchen and larder. Martin the Green used his arcane eye spell to scope out the temple and found there were still many soldiers in the kitchen. At least seven were guarding that lower room, and then he saw two more by the stairs, three at the top of the stairs and over a dozen in the main chamber, though some of these were resting. Outside, he saw young pages tending to a half-dozen horses and mules. Two of the horses were fine heavy destriers, their barding was off and was being scrubbed by one boy. There were also more soldiers. One was on the fragile roof of the temple, and others were set up in pairs at the corners of the open grounds and the rock garden. There were still others he noted patrolling the woods beyond to the west.

“We are not going to get out this way by fighting without being more coordinated with Ratchis and the others,” Martin finally said. “This will have to wait for tomorrow.”

“But I thought we already coordinated?” Kazrack was confused.

”Yes, but we didn’t know the situation before, now we do,” Martin replied. “When they see no alarm has been raised, they will realize we are not trying to get out and they will wait, anyway they were expecting us to come from the crack in the ridge. After that collapse, they can’t be expecting that anymore.”

”I hope you are right,” Kazrack said, as they began to walk back down to the caverns to hide for the rest of the day and night.

Luckily, Martin was right, and as night fell and still there was no sign of their companions, Roland, Ratchis and Logan climbed quietly back up the black hill into the deep trees and slept.

Kazrack found a small cavern with a raised floor that looked defensible, and they did their best to make a camp as they had the two nights before. While Kazrack loved the bare stone, the other two adventurers were cold and aching, as they did not have much of their camping gear with them. And while Martin the Green was wearing his ring,

Lacan's Demise, he had only put it on two days before and the power that kept him from needing to eat or feeling hunger had not activated yet.¹⁰⁸

As they did their best to get comfortable there was a sudden vibration in the ground, as the floor of the chamber began to ripple near the center, as if the hard-packed earth and slabs of stone were liquid. A bizarre creature rose from the swirling earth. It was a little over three feet tall and had a squat body like a rounded cone. Its skin was brown, gray, and red stony scales, both like and unlike a lizard's, and it had three arms, three legs and three large eyes spaced evenly about its body. But perhaps most disturbing of all, was its three-lipped mouth of jagged teeth at the top of its body. In a moment, the rippling effect was gone, and the creature walked on the solid earth towards them.

"I think it's time we face the lizard-priest," Martin said quietly, and standing. He began to look around for signs of more disturbances in the surrounding cavern.

"Let us try and talk with him," Kazrack said. Martin laughed a nervous laugh again. Dorn was loading his crossbow.

"Nyaaah, nyahh! Destroyers," the thing said with an echoing alien voice.

"We will not destroy unless forced to," Kazrack replied, hefting his halberd.

"Come... Message from Snuchri send..." the thing said.

"What is the message?" Kazrack asked.

"He swears blood vengeance on you and your kin... When the time of mourning is done expect him to come. This is your only warning," the creature's voice displayed no emotion, and perhaps not even understanding of what it was saying.

"I understand," was all Kazrack said.

"Destroyer of his line, there is no forgiveness," the creature said, and it came closer, turning and revealing that one of its clawed hands held something white and speckled. Kazrack held out his two hands and the creature dropped two pieces of broken eggshell into them.

The thing walked back to the center of the cavern and then melted back into the stone floor.

Martin just shook his head.

Tholem, the 25th of Keent – 565 H.E.

Soon after Martin and Kazrack came up with a plan for getting out of the caverns and through the temple, Martin received a sending from Roland of Bast.

"It's early morning. We should attack within the hour using two directions and surprise. Detail any other plan. We must move along either way. Now.

"We're ready. Will try and carve out opening in rear of temple using magical silence. We'll move first; You watch. Engage when they're stirred up."

Roland, Ratchis and Logan made their way to the stony grade just above the temple of Bast and north of it. They squatted among the thorny bushes there, remaining hidden.

¹⁰⁸ This takes seven full days.

“Once the others emerge and if they are spotted, we will have to distract the mercenaries to allow them to get away,” Ratchis whispered, though he mostly reiterated the plan for Logan’s benefit. “If their defenses are too well-organized, however, we may have to run as well as soon as the others are clear.”

“Heh. I am not too worried,” Logan replied.

“There are a lot of them,” Ratchis said.

“We fought a lot of those fire newts,” Logan said.

“They’ll fight better than that, and the fire newts didn’t have powerful clerics and mages in their number.”

“Well, I’ve seen more of this company than anyone and I am not impressed by their men-at-arms,” Logan said.

“We take out the mage first, if at all possible,” Ratchis said.

Logan nodded. “If we take out the leaders, the others are almost certain to break and scatter.”

Just outside the door from the catacombs, Martin quietly made himself, Dorn and Kazrack invisible. Dorn was in the front of the line, with Kazrack holding on to his belt, and Martin keeping his hand on the dwarf’s shoulder. Kazrack then cast silence on a coin and fumbled it over to Dorn.

Dorn pushed the door open slowly and was glad that the swollen wood and rusted hinges aided in making it an easy task. Kazrack’s spell dampened what was normally a very creaky egress. The cohort froze instinctually as he saw one of the mercenaries frown and turn to look at the door, which he noticed move out of the corner of his eye. The guard put a hand to the hilt of the sword at his side and walked towards the door. He wore a tabard of red and gold over his chainmail and a heavy helm with a nose-guard. The man-at-arms looked beyond the door, and then shrugged and turned around.

“I think Sergeant Sewell is right,” the man said to his companions. “We should board those doors up; they keep opening up.”

The three adventurers heard nothing of what was said, but breathed easy, seeing the guard go back into the kitchen and take up a more relaxed stance at the end of the narrow hall. They continued to move forward slowly. There was another guard just at the end of the narrow hall and two more at the entrance to the hall that led to the other set of catacombs. Two more guards stood at the exit of the room. It was a broader hallway that turned right and led up the stairs to the vestry.

Dorn, Kazrack and Martin had made it to the corridor when the guards began a confused pantomime. The radius of the silence spell moved past them and one of them noted that something was not right. He tried to cry out, but nothing came, and then suddenly his voice returned, even though the fleeing dwarf and two humans could not hear him.

“Intruders! Invisible intruders! They came out of the catacombs! They’re invisible!”

With a confidence that only came from practice, the mercenaries formed a curved line, their arms outstretched as they felt around for their invisible foes. Other guards took their long spears from where they leaned on the wall and took up positions between their searching companions, thrusting their spears forward. However, Dorn, Kazrack and Martin had already made it into the hall, and the silence blocked the guards on the far end from hearing the commotion. However, as the three came around the corner, the hallway was wide enough to allow sound to get by and the mercenary at the top of the steps, hearing the others came down with his sword drawn.

“Where are they? Where are they?” the guard cried, but suddenly his voice was gone as well as the Dorn, Martin and Kazrack hurried past him up through the trapdoor into the vestry. Luckily, there were no guards there. Dorn allowed

Kazrack to take the lead, the dwarf hurrying out of the vestry by means of the left-hand door and around to the narrow rear hall of the temple's main chamber. Now outside of the area of effect of the silence spell, Kazrack could hear more men-at-arms in the large main chamber, and he tried his best to make no sound.

The man-at-arms who had been on the steps came hurrying back up, trying to call out to his companions, but his voice was gone once again as he bumped into Dorn and fell back down the stairs slamming into his allies as they came around the corner with arms still outstretched looking for the invisible foes. Martin and Dorn left the vestry coming around the corner to join Kazrack who has just used the power of his gods to sculpt a narrow passage¹⁰⁹ through the temple's outer wall. Dorn threw the silenced coin away,¹¹⁰ and they could hear the mercenaries coming up into the vestry, yelling and the other guards in the main chamber hearing the raised alarm and coming to investigate.

"Split up!" Kazrack told his friends, and he hustled off towards the sparser trees on the right. Martin the Green, however, kept his grip on Dorn, who took off to the left.

"Movement in the woods!" cried the guard atop the roof, as the mercenaries poured out the temple, both from the front and out the hole Kazrack had created.

From their vantage point, Ratchis and Logan saw the commotion.

"Do you suppose they found them?" Ratchis asked.

"Well, they are chasing someone, and it would be too much of a coincidence if it just happened to be someone else," Logan replied.

"It could be one of Richard the Red's companions, but I doubt it," Ratchis replied. "Let's go down into the woods and move parallel with them, ready to strike."

Roland growled his agreement. They split up as well. Ratchis made straight for the temple, but Roland and Logan made around by way of the thicker western woods.

"There is one! Quadrant alpha," the mercenary on the temple roof shouted pointing to the north. There was a flurry of arrow fire, and Kazrack quietly swore as one whizzed by him quite by accident.

Ratchis cried out in pain, as an arrow clipped his arm.

"Anhur! Grant me sight beyond sight so that all might see these cowards who do not fight like men and flee like thieves, so that I might skewer them on my divine spear," a voice bellowed from the edge of the woods. "There is the stonefolk and the half-breed!"

Ratchis brought his great sword before him and looked around wildly for Kazrack. Not seeing the dwarf even though he was now visible, he started to run back towards the rise, leading the guards away from the temple.

"D'nar! He can see me! I do not think we can outrun them all! We must take a stand!" Kazrack called, catching sight of his companion.

Four of the mercenaries broke through the treeline from Ratchis's right, cutting off Kazrack and setting up a line of long spears. The half-orc could hear more coming through the trees on his left. The militant of Anhur came into the long narrow clearing. He had a full blond beard and was nearly as tall as Ratchis. His half-plate armor was dented and scratched, but over it he wore a maroon tabard set with a silver spear emblazoned on an ankh. The same symbol was created in actual silver on a chain about his neck. In his hands he a wickedly sharp spear with broad slightly serrated edges.

¹⁰⁹ Kazrack used *stone shape* to make the hole.

¹¹⁰ They decided to get rid of the coin once they were outside because they wanted to be able to give each other instructions and hear if they were called to by the rest of the party.

“Anhur! Anhur! Anhur! Fill me with your divine wrath! Your endless diligence! I shall forget fear and strike straight with my spear for justice and law!” The militant’s voice grew deeper as he spoke, and his words grew more difficult to understand, as he began to huff and puff as if having a fit. He charged at Kazrack, crying his god’s name aloud one more time.

“Martin! Follow me! I saw Ratchis,” Dorn hissed to the watch-mage, but Martin had lost his grip on the cohort amid the thick trees and had to stumble towards the voice the best he could, as two spear-wielding mercenaries came stumbling towards them from the right.

Martin the Green saw Roland’s lithe panther-form, moving silently and smoothly as a shadow, his deep blue-black fur lending something to the illusion of it. The Bastite leapt into a nearby tree to get a view of the approaching guards at the edge of the trees.

“Roland! It’s me! And Dorn is around, too. Kazrack is somewhere ahead, near where I think Ratchis is,” the watch-mage called up as loudly as he dared.

The Bastite looked around and took a whiff. He growled, as he saw a couple of the guards approaching, with crossbows ready just outside of the woods and looking in the direction of Ratchis. He could also see the crimson-robed battle-mage floating above the temple to get a better view.

Dorn took off back into the clearing about the temple making for the more open area north of it where Ratchis was hurrying to cut off the Ancellus of Anhur. He unwittingly got into the range of the militant’s invisibility purge. Roland leapt down out of the tree and ran right at the bow-wielding men-at-arms to keep them from targeting Ratchis. The guards re-aimed their shots at the last minute, but it was to no avail. They were unable to get a good bead on the great cat pounding towards them.

The militant wizard swooped down with great speed, lining herself up perfectly as she rubbed bit of fur on a metal rod and cried, “Fwam! Fwam! Fwam!” A bolt of lightning burst out in front of her. The sudden blast of light shocked Roland and Dorn as both were able to roll away from the brunt of it, but the bolt sliced through a tree setting it ablaze and just before dissipating got just far enough to fry Ratchis as well. He shook violently and was thrown to the ground.¹¹¹

On his hands and knees, Ratchis called to Nephthys and healed his wounds, but then shuddered again as a bolt struck him from one of the men-at-arms.

“Nice shot, dead man,” Logan quipped as he stepped from behind a tree and viciously cut down the mercenary with one hard blow to the neck. The Herman-lander smiled and moved on to the next soldier but keeping an eye on the wizard.

“Great queen, Bast! Thou who art as powerful as thou art graceful,” Roland chanted in his head, growling the equivalent in the speech of cats.¹¹² “Grant me the benison of one of thy children.” He turned in a wide circle and roared and, in a flash, there appeared a golden lion, its full mane swaying in the cold wind. Its roar echoed Roland’s, but it did not attack, holding back at the Bastite’s command.

Four of the six mercenaries that had been near Ratchis moved to engage Kazrack.

Two more men were coming around from the other side of the temple. They bore long swords and shields, but also had heavy maces at their sides. There appeared behind them another man. He bore a silver medallion shaped like an

¹¹¹ **DM’s Note:** Originally, the evoker was only going to fry Dorn and Roland, but Ratchis just happened to move into direct line of it on his action, and I was describing the tree cracking and catching fire, I realized there was enough area of effect left to catch him at the very end. Dorn and Roland made their saves, Ratchis didn’t. Like weapons, we play with knockdown for certain spells.

¹¹² **DM’s Note:** Roland has the Natural Spell feat.

open tome about his neck, an ankh emblazoned upon it. He bore a shield with a similar device with an arcane rune on each side of it and a dull gray heavy mace, not the long spears of the rank-and-file soldiers. The other man was also armed with sword and shield. He was clean shaven, and his helmet was carved with the symbol of an ibis bird.¹¹³

Logan cut down another one of the soldiers, and was about to move to attack the militant wizard, when the new arrivals hurried to cut him off at the command of the third man. They moved to flank with the aid of one of the remaining soldiers in this area.

“Left flank, Sergeant Sewell,” the man with the shield commanded his companion.

“Yes, Inquisitor Clerebold,” the other replied.¹¹⁴

“Hamanasemo,” the wizard intoned, and Sergeant Sewell began to grow. Soon, he was over twelve feet tall, and his weapons had grown with him.

“No one can defeat the Impervious Ward,” the sergeant said, forcing Logan to frantically parry to avoid being cut open and crushed by the now gigantic sword.

“Give yourselves up and you will not be harmed. This I swear,” the Inquisitor called to Logan

“I’ll cut your balls off,” Logan replied.

Roland prayed again and this time both he and his summoned feline ally grew to twice their size as well.¹¹⁵

The battle-mage pulled a scroll from her satchel and unrolling it chanted arcane words. “*Snaseanda ammana thionscain Agon a abhaile leag.*”¹¹⁶

A mighty invisible force slammed into the enlarged lion and it let out a whimper and a snarl, but did not fall, or even slow down as it obeyed Roland’s next command.

The Bastite and his summoned ally headed for the battle-mage who had foolishly failed to take off high enough into the air again to not be reached by the great leaping cats. She cried out in agony as their claws and teeth ripped into her flesh and grabbing on, Roland forced her back down to the ground, smashing her into a puddle of her own blood.

Again and again, the frenzied thrusts of the Militant’s spear scraped across Kazrack’s breast plate to no effect, while Kazrack managed to get in a few thrusts with the pointed end of his pole-arm, even if he was unable to get his full strength behind the blows. However, the four soldiers on their way over were being joined by a fifth, penning in Kazrack by a clump of trees.

Martin and Dorn had made it around the edge of the temple clearing and were at the edge of the area where Ratchis and Kazrack fought the mercenaries. An area that had smaller scrubby trees and a great deal of twisting manzanita under foot.

“I hope you have something up your sleeve,” Dorn said, seeing Ratchis finally getting to his feet.

“I’m trying my best,” Martin replied defensively. “Lentus!”

¹¹³ The ibis bird is the holy animal of Thoth.

¹¹⁴ Paladins dedicated to Thoth are called “Inquisitors” and are most common in Neergaard and the Black Islands. They follow and enforce a very strict interpretation of the responsible use of arcane (and to a lesser extent, divine) magic, based on the writings in the Thothian “Book of Truth”.

¹¹⁵ **DM’s Note:** Roland cast Cat Growth a limited variation of Animal Growth that also works on him when he is in cat form.

¹¹⁶ This spell is *Agon’s Hammer*

All five of the mercenaries jerked awkwardly as they moved with exaggerated slowness. Kazrack easily knocked aside and otherwise avoided all five of their spear points as they arrived in his vicinity.

“My faith is stronger than yours militant! You will fall!” Kazrack turned, ignoring the soldiers, to thrust his pole-axe into an opening in the warrior-priest’s defense. The militant seemed more concerned with skewering Kazrack than defending himself and gave no notice to the gouts of blood now running down his left leg.

Ratchis crawled away from the two soldiers near him and called to his goddess to grant him Bull’s Strength, and with a roar, side-stepped two spear thrusts as he got into close quarters and cleaved the top of one of the mercenary’s head off, helmet and all. He also dealt a heavy blow against the shield of one of the sergeants who came running over.

“Yield!” He cried at the half-orc, but there was little authority in his voice.

“Somnus! Martin said as he threw sand in the general direction of the soldiers near Ratchis and the two spearmen fell right to sleep.

“Why don’t you guys run away before we have to kill you?” Dorn asked one of the mercenaries as he moved in to support Kazrack.

Ratchis grunted his approval and ran over to join Kazrack.

The militant of Anhur thrust his spear again when he saw an opening, but again Kazrack’s armor turned the blow aside, and this time the shaft of the weapon slipped from his grasp and the butt-end slammed back into the priest’s eye with the force of punch.¹¹⁷

End of Session #82¹¹⁸

AQUERRA

¹¹⁷ **DM’s Note:** Ancellus suffered a critical fumble: Reflex save (DC 18) or hit self, half damage.

¹¹⁸ **DM’s Note:** Unfortunately, this was Logan’s player’s (Matt U.) final session. A combination of difference in playstyle and personality conflicts with Kazrack’s player led him to decide it was best to drop out.

Session #83

Ratchis made his way around the Militant of Anhur with his great sword over his head, hanging down loosely, waiting to strike. Kazrack harried the warrior-priest from the other side, driving him further back from his spearmen who could not keep up as they were slowed. Ancellus' helmet rang with a downward blow from Ratchis that would have cut a normal man in two lengthwise. However, the knights of Anhur do not fall so easily. Kazrack felt the punch of the spear against the coif of his armor and then the point scraped the dwarf's face and neck, sending out a gout of blood. Dorn became visible as he cut one of the spearmen down, and quickly had another one reeling, before having to back off some and take in the three remaining men.

Logan danced back again and again to keep from being flanked, but even the enlarged sergeant's parried blows sent tremors down his arm that made it feel as if it might shake off. The other soldier kept moving as well, to keep Logan between them. Finally, Logan dove into a tumble and through the sergeant's legs, cutting him deep in the calf as he went by. He brought his sword around for another blow, but the sergeant blocked it on his shield. For a moment, the sword was wedged there, and Logan jerked it free by dropping into a crouch, dodging his foe's gigantic sword as it came around for his head. Logan's blade wobbled and crunched near the center and was now bent at an odd angle.¹¹⁹

"Balls!" Logan swore. He only avoided the follow up blow because Roland's great lion leapt into the fray. A moment before Roland had licked the lion, calling to Bast to heal him, as Heriot the battle-mage continued to bleed out.

"Watch-mage! Call off your beasts that we may parlay!" Clerebold, Inquisitor of Thoth called to Martin, who watched the action from behind a tree. It was not clear if the paladin saw Martin, however, or if he was simply calling out in hopes of being heard.

Roland and his lion faltered, as Martin stepped into the clear.

"Throw down your weapons, then we'll parley," Kazrack called, holding back a blow against Ancellus.

Dorn moved back, keeping up his guard, cursing that he was now back in the range of the three remaining soldiers' long spears.

"Nobody tries anything," Dorn warned.

"Sir, we are ready to stand down when your men have," Martin said. Six more spearmen came around the southwestern side of the temple.

"Yeah, back off or the mage buys it," Logan tumbled over to Heriot and held his bent sword to her neck. She coughed and a bubble of blood appeared on her lips. She was very pale.

Ratchis moved back as if to lower his sword, but Ancellus was wrapped up in the lust of battle and the honor it did his god. He thrust forward with his spear and Ratchis was barely able to parry it away with his great sword. The militant of Anhur spun around to knock Kazrack's blows back, and continued, using the momentum of the spin to renew his attack on the half-orc.

The paladin gestured for the spearmen to lower their spears. The enlarged sergeant lowered his sword, and the other soldiers followed suit.

"You had better tell this one to calm down or parley will be impossible," Kazrack said.

"Stay away from him and his fit shall pass," Clerebold advised. "Or drop your weapons, he will not strike those he deems as defenseless even in his fury."

¹¹⁹ **DM's Note:** Logan's second strike fumbled getting this result: Hard Awkward Blow, Roll weapon's damage, double and add Strength bonus. Compare this to weapon's hardness and hps to see if it breaks.

“You drop your weapons first, we are certainly not surrendering to you,” Martin replied.

Not sure such a man would ever deem him defenseless while he yet stood, Ratchis rained down a series of vicious blows that bent and scored the militant’s armor, but still the Spear of Anhur would not fall.

“Fall! So, I don’t have to kill you!” Ratchis swore, but he felt the shaft of the spear slap the side of his head again and had to duck to avoid the accompanying thrust.

Roland nudged Logan out of the way and growled a prayer to stabilize Heriot.

Two more heavy blows and Ancellus fell, dead.

“Watch-mage! Come forward and make an oath to Thoth that if we surrender you will spare the lives of my men. I give you my word we will make ourselves your honorable prisoners, or else we might as well meet our ends fighting.”

“I will,” Martin said, and he stepped forward, with his own hands open and in front of him. He placed his hand on the holy symbol about the paladin’s neck and swore.

“We have made our oath. Now, you have until the count of five or I will fell you,” Kazrack said, sternly.

“I will drop my sword,” Clerebold said, doing so. “But I was rather hoping we could come to an agreement without being stripped of arms; that is, depending on your sense of honor.”

“Yeah, and maybe if you’re real nice, maybe we’ll still let you arrest us,” Logan kept his sword at the ready.

Ratchis looked up from casting Nephthys’ healing graces on himself. “I will not approach closer than twenty feet until this thing is settled,” he said, his great sword biting into the bloody earth beside the corpse of Ancellus.

“I accept your surrender,” Martin the Green said, and he scooped up the paladin’s sword. “But we will have to insist that your men surrender their weapons. We would not want one of them to think to play the hero, when real heroes come to agreements with honor and abide by them. Don’t you agree?”

Clerebold nodded dumbly.

“Have your men drop their spears and weapon belts and they will be collected and returned,” Martin said. “We have no desire to leave you defenseless in this dangerous environment.”

One by one, the mercenaries dropped their weapons and lined up to enter the temple. Kazrack applied divine healing to one of the bleeding soldiers, while Clerebold took care of others. Some of the soldiers carefully carried the wounded in as well.

“I am sorry that we had to slay the militant,” Kazrack said, coming over to shake the hand of his foe.

“Waste no tears for that one,” Clerebold replied. “He died as he would have wanted, fighting, regardless of the reason.”

He entered the temple as well, followed by Kazrack and Dorn.

“Well, this is the better bargaining position,” Roland said, transforming back into his human self “Shall we hold the wizard separately to assure their good behavior?”

“We are being honorable about this,” Martin replied.

“But you are going to look through her spellbook while she’s out, right?” Roland winked, walking towards the temple doors.

“Um... I hadn’t thought of that,” Martin said. “I probably won’t have time to learn any new ones anyway.”

“I still think we can’t trust them,” Logan said. “You know we’re only going to have to fight them again if we let them go. Might be best to just kill them now.”

“You must miss, Gunthar,” Ratchis said, angrily, as he went in as well. “Because you are in an awful hurry to take his place.”

Logan sneered.

The other mercenaries were rounded up. There were a half-dozen exploring the edge of the rent in the ridge that could not climb up fast enough to join the fight before it was ended. There were four more who had returned to Summit for news and supplies and arrived as the sun set to find themselves quickly taken. Soon, the Keepers of the Gate were in the absurd position of guarding nearly four times their number.

“Should we lock them in the basement?” Kazrack asked, not sure what to do.

“Inquisitor Clerebold has given his word for him and his men and that is more than sufficient for me,” Martin replied.

“That, it certainly is. However,” the paladin cleared his throat. “Now that I have done you a favor and surrendered to keep my men from being killed, would you please return the favor by explaining why it is than an obvious man of honor such as yourself would ignore the king’s calling and his duty to the kingdom he swore to help, both as a man and as representative of your Academy?”

Martin sighed.

“I shall endeavor to explain it all once we have worked out a promise that you will not seek to delay us,” Martin said.

“Our intention was never to delay you, or to keep you from any mission, but rather to come to the king to face charges. No exceptions could be made. I have no authority to accept excuses for the king, only the king can do that,” Clerebold said.

“And now?” Kazrack asked.

“Now? Now, we have failed to arrest you. We must return to Twelve Trolls to alert him and discover our next instructions, if he is even still willing to keep us in his employ,” the paladin explained. “And if not? We may turn our eye to the conflict in the Black Islands.”

“On whose side?” Logan asked.

“The law says we must tolerate the snake-worshippers, but when they have turned against a king anointed by god and his people in order to carve their own kingdom? There is no law that says I cannot relish in bringing them justice,” Clerebold’s eyes shone. “Now that Ancellus is dead, there is no one’s vote to stop us.”

“So, you feel your duty is to return to the king and tell him what happened here?” Martin asked.

“And anything else I have learned,” the paladin replied, quite honestly.

The Keepers of the Gate went into the vestry to confer, leaving Dorn in the main chamber to watch over the small army by himself.

“When is the beam of light supposed to hit?” Kazrack asked.

Martin looked at Ratchis. “Fuh... No, three days at sunrise,” the watch-mage said.

Ratchis counted on his fingers and nodded his agreement.

“We can’t keep them here and we can’t let them go, if the king is what we think he is, he might be able to get something ready and back here in that time,” Ratchis said.¹²⁰

“We can lock them in the basement,” Kazrack suggested again.

“Or kill them,” Logan suggested in a whisper. “I know we are only going to have to fight these guys again.”

No one replied to the suggestion.

Back in the main temple chamber a few moments later, Martin continued. “You understand that we cannot let you go and talk to the king. At least not yet. He might be able to muster some other force that would delay us, and we cannot be delayed.”

“What is it that is so important?” Clerebold asked.

Martin the Green began a brief overview of everything the Keepers of the Gate had done since leaving the Garvan Gnomes at the tail end of the previous winter. He concentrated on how figuring out how to get into Hurgun’s Maze at the proper time was of the utmost importance. The party could risk no chance of missing it.

“Even though not going to the Key Room might mean just that,” Richard the Red said, appearing at the door to the vestry.

“Where have you been?” Ratchis demanded.

“I told you before, Ratchis, once I have gone to the realm of shadow sometimes it takes me a long time to return,” Richard smiled as if not some afflicted by a horrible fate.

“We are not going to the Key Room,” Kazrack stated flatly.

“Wait!” Clerebold stood. “I do not know who this person is, or what this ‘Key Room’ argument is about, but we have not yet come to binding terms of our compromise, and I would rather know the disposition of my men and myself before you move on to other matters.”

In the end, Martin and Clerebold were able to hammer out an agreement. The Inquisitor of Thoth and his soldiers, along with Heriot of the Ironstaff, would wait at the temple of Bast for four days before leaving to return to Twelve Trolls. However, Clerebold made no promise to withhold information from any other of his men who might be missing and return or other agents of the king that might arrive, or to keep them from leaving.

With that settled, the party could get back to arguing about the Key Room as they been before the Company of the Impervious Ward had arrived.

As evening fell, Cordell of Thoth and Razzle Greyish returned, looking a little tired, but Razzle was immaculate and smiling as always. They explained that they sought out another way out of the caverns they knew of, but that was many miles distant.

“The soldiers aren’t worth much, but I am sure we can get a lovely ransom on the wizardess and the paladin,” Razzle suggested.

“They are free to go in four days’ time,” Roland explained.

¹²⁰ The party found what they think is evidence the king might be of demonic origins as well.

“Some people have no sense of tradition anymore,” Razzle replied, and tucking his plumed hat beneath his arm, he went down to the larder to find more wine.

“Anyway, I believe Bast’s words made it clearest,” Roland said, getting back to the argument. “I believe we are making a grave error to not go to the Key Room.”

“We do not have time,” Ratchis said.

“We have reason to believe time will not be an issue wherever the Key Room is,” Logan said. “It moves slower there, or something? I vote we go. I mean, you know...knowing where the door is, that doesn’t mean there isn’t a key.”

“I wish Chance were still here,” Martin sighed. “He could have settled this with a coin toss and we would have had faith in it.”

”I thought we had settled this foolishness?” Kazrack was exasperated. “We cannot go.”

Martin nodded his agreement.

“And you Dorn?” Ratchis asked.

Dorn shook his head, unsure what to say.

“I notice that the two who most want to go are the two with the least experience with Richard the Red,” Ratchis said.

“We need a formal vote,” Kazrack said. “All for going to Key Room?”

Dorn, Roland and Logan said, “Aye.”

“Those opposed?”

Martin and Kazrack said, “Nay.”

Ratchis looked around and then said, “Nay” as well.

“We are at an impasse,” Martin said.

“What do you think?” Kazrack turned to Clerebold. “You have overheard our discussions, what would you do?”

“I would seek out a temple of Thoth and do more research,” the paladin of Thoth responded.

“I only voted to go straight for the Maze and forgetting the Key Room because if we are going to fail, at least let it be actually getting into Hurgun’s Maze, not some side place that we may or may not need to go to.” Martin explained.

“And I only voted as I did because I wanted to ensure a tie,” Ratchis said. “I want more time to think.”

The arguing started up again, but soon Kazrack had everyone quiet down.

“I have an opinion that is unswayable by any means,” the dwarf said. “I know where my faith lies and nothing anyone says can change that.”

“And I feel the same way about my position,” said Roland.

“Exactly, but we are all willing to accept the decision of the majority of the group, correct?” Kazrack asked.

Everyone nodded.

“Then I shall remove myself from further debate, as should Roland,” Kazrack said. “Obviously, it is the choices the others make that matters in this case.”

“Well, I already said why I am making my decision, one chance to fail is better than two chances to fail,” Martin said.

“And I am certain we should go because I think we may find something in there that will give us a fighting chance while in the Maze,” Logan said. “If the one chance of failure is a big one, but you have an opportunity for it be two with smaller chances of failure, then you trade up.”

“So, they will leave as well,” Kazrack said. “Leaving the undecideds to talk.”

“We’ll go,” Ratchis said, and he stalked out of the temple. Dorn followed soon after.

Meanwhile, Kazrack went back down to the caverns and cast the runes once again.

“I apologize for the temerity to bother you again so soon,” Kazrack said to his gods. “But the circumstances have changed since the last time. Should we stop at the Key Room on the way to Maze, or go directly to the Maze?”

The rune-thrower moved the stones about some, but he did not feel the elation of enlightenment and saw no patterns in the runes. All he felt was a great sadness wash over him.¹²¹

Outside the night air was cold. The sky to the east was clear, but the west was a wall of gray, black and shades of dark blue, where smoke still swirled out of the valley. The taste of ashes in the back of their throats never seemed to go away.

Ratchis led Dorn up the ridge a ways until they were looking down over the great hole in the earth Kazrack had made. It was a black void in the night.

“It’s the ‘rousing success’,” Dorn said.

Ratchis grunted his lack of understanding.

“Roland’s answer from his goddess. It said, ‘rousing success’,” Dorn reminded the Friar. “I like the sound of that.”¹²²

“I fear that if we use this Key Room we will be opening the way for the other parties interested in the Maze’s power to get in,” Ratchis replied. “Our enemies will be free to go into Hurgun’s Maze without our being there to stop them.”

“I thought the door was hidden,” Dorn replied.

“It might be... It should be...,” Ratchis paused. “We don’t know.”

There was a long silence.

“What would it take me to convince you to forget the Key Room and try only for the Maze?” Ratchis asked his friend and cohort.

¹²¹ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack’s player botched his rune-throwing skill roll.

¹²² Roland cast *divination* in Session #80.

"If you told me to do so," Dorn replied without a beat.

Ratchis let out a growling sigh.

"...Or it we take so long to decide that we have to go to the Maze before we run out of time," Dorn appended.

"I will decide before that happens," Ratchis said. "In fact, I have decided right now." And with that he went back into the temple.

"So, you killed all its babies?" Roland was asking. Kazrack was relaying to him the tale of the strange reptilian priest and his egg-chamber, while Martin did some more studying with Richard the Red.

"Yes," Kazrack replied.

"You killed an entire generation?" Roland asked, forgetting to close his mouth when he was done speaking.

"The last generation, if what that thing said is to be believed," Kazrack said, some regret in his voice.

"Well, that seems like a good reason to hate you and want to kill you," Roland replied.

"I think we should let it have you if it comes," Logan smirked. He had been standing nearby and overheard the tale. Kazrack looked at the young Herman-lander and furrowed his brow. He opened his mouth to speak, but Logan walked away.

"I am voting for the Key Room," Ratchis announced.¹²³ Kazrack's shoulders sagged.

"That makes four against two, so that means we're going," Roland said. "Now?"

"It's been a long day. Let's get some rest. We start digging first thing in the morning," Ratchis replied.

Balem, the 26th of Keent – 565 H.E.

"You are going on a trip on the day named for my goddess based on a divination of her wisdom accompanied by one of her chosen servants," Roland said, almost singing with joy. He took a long sip of wine. "This is a most auspicious occasion."

"Just don't drink too much of that, there'll probably be fighting," Logan said, taking his own swig of wine from the bottle he carried.

The Keepers of the Gate had awakened early to carefully discuss what spells were best to prepare, getting the opinion of Richard the Red, who suggested spells that protected from the elements and from negative energy. The party also made Clerebold, and the now awakened Heriot of the Ironstaff, to re-iterate their promises on their own behalf and on that of their soldiers.

Richard the Red bid them farewell at the hatch down to the narrow hall that led to the partially buried portal room.

"One last thing," he said. "Where do we stand to see the light that will hit and show the way into Hurgun's Maze?"

¹²³ **DM's Note:** Ratchis' player explained later that he felt split about 50/50 in the decision and was only going against the Key Room because it seemed like the pragmatic choice based on the limited information. However, once Dorn said to him that he would change his vote if Ratchis told him to do so, the Friar of Nephthys decided, he would rather give up his own divided position on the subject than force someone else to change their choice.

“How do you know about that?” Kazrack barked.

Richard shrugged. “Kazrack, does it even matter at this point?”

“We are not telling you,” Ratchis said.

“But what if you don’t return?” Richard asked, a look of concern washing over his face. “Someone needs to go into this Maze before worse things than fire-breathing lizardmen come through the rifts in the valley.”

“Then you had better pray to Isis we’ll be back then,” Logan said, and with that he climbed down the shaft. Roland laughed as he followed, and then went Kazrack.

“If this is some kind of trap or trick you are pulling Richard,” the dwarf said, stopping to look up at the rogue watchmage as half of his body was down the hatch. “I will kill you.”

Richard winked at him and flashed his bright smile.

In the rectangular black-walled room, the party began to dig out the portal. Kazrack used his miracle of *soften earth and stone* to make the black earth into running rivers of sand that the others carted and swept away.

It was still nearly three hours of work to make all of the golden runes about the border of the black stone portal visible. The stone within the wall was black and smooth. The Keepers of the Gate could see dim reflections of themselves in the light of Dorn and Martin’s glowing medallions.

Martin the Green took the *prayer rug of the wayfarer* and wrapped a few unnecessary things in it and hid it beneath a pile of black earth.¹²⁴

Logan looked at him strangely.

“You can’t bring a pocket dimensional space into another pocket dimensional space,” Martin tried to explain.

“What happens?” asked Roland.

“Nothing good,” Martin replied. “I only wish I could leave the *Book of Black Circles* here.”

“And let Richard get it? No,” Kazrack said.

“Don’t worry, Kazrack, I’m sure if I tried to leave it behind it would try to subsume my will and make me into an evil necromancer cloaked in black and green flame and hurling blobs of enervating flaming death at everyone.”

Kazrack’s eyes opened wide.

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen,” Ratchis said.

Martin examined the runes. “I can’t tell what they mean, but I think I can pronounce them,” he said, looking at his copy of *Wards, Sigils and Runes* for reference.¹²⁵ “I suspect that if I read them aloud the portal will open.”

Everyone stepped away from the portal.

“*Utkin Atarev Utaalk Utaalk Atarev Utkin,*,” Martin said, and the golden runes flashed from right to left and back again, and the polished black stone suddenly rippled as if liquid.

“It is open?” Logan asked. There was a sudden cacophony of screeches as six shadow forms emerged from the inky

¹²⁴ The party found this magical item in the hooked horrors’ nest as they traveled underground to arrive at Nikar. (Session #67)

¹²⁵ Martin received this rare and handy tome as an Isis’ Day gift from Richard the Red. (Session #38)

void and swooped down on the party.

“Oh no,” said Kazrack.

“Nephthys! If these creatures be the product of undeath send them away from us!” Ratchis cried out, clutching his belt of scored chain links. Three of the shadows swooped away even as they were all coming down to attack Martin, disappearing back into the void of the portal. One of them let out a chilling laugh and brushed a claw-like hand through Kazrack’s body. The dwarf shuddered as he felt some of his body’s strength get sucked away. Another swooped at Dorn but missed.

The last shadow dove for Martin as if to tackle him, but instead it was sucked right into the watch-mage’s chest and disappeared. Martin felt a tight coldness in his lungs. Negative energy crackled along the outside of his body.

“Oh my!” Martin exclaimed.

“Oh great Queen Bast! Hear me! Grant me the power to smite these creatures of evil and darkness!” Roland chanted, holding up his ornate cat’s eye he wore about his neck as he cast *holy smite*, slapping the holy symbol against his open palm.

There was flash of golden light and one of the shadows seemed to explode, sending droplets of inky blackness that faded into nothing in all directions. One of them twisted in the air as in agony, even as the one that had disappeared into Martin oozed back out wailing in a disturbing child-like voice. Most noticeably, Logan nearly dropped his sword as he flinched in pain. He moved over to Roland and slammed his fist into the man’s ribs. Logan was not much taller than Roland, but he had much broader shoulders. In fact, Roland could almost be called dainty with his narrow hips, curly ringlets of hair on his head and babyface cheeks.

“Ow,” Roland complained, turning to look at Logan with shock and annoyance.

Ratchis called to Nephthys again and finally the two remaining shadows fled back into the black portal.

“What was that for?” Roland asked Logan.

“That spell, whatever it was, don’t cast it again,” Logan said. “It hurt.”¹²⁶

“Is it my fault your soul strays from a righteous path?” Roland replied, offended. “And do not strike me again, if you care to keep your hands.”

Logan muttered under his breath.

“Just be careful when casting is all,” Ratchis said, but though his words were meant for Roland, he still looked at Logan. “Logan is our ally, and we would not want to jeopardize that.”

“He should apologize,” Roland said, folding his arms across his chest.

Ratchis looked to Logan.

“Very well. I apologize for striking you,” the young man said to the Bastite.

“Apology accepted,” Roland replied rather insincerely.

Meanwhile, Kazrack was approaching the inky void beyond the portal with a shovel in hand.

“Shall we enter?” he asked, looking back at the others.

¹²⁶ **DM’s Note:** Since Logan is not of good alignment, he suffered half the normal effects of the *holy smite*.

"I know of no better option," Martin the Green shrugged his shoulders.

Kazrack began to slide the head of the shovel into the portal when he suddenly felt a great suction threatening to yank the tool from his hands. He pulled it back with all his might and looked to the others with worried eyes.

"I think we should all enter together, lest we are separated in the space between the worlds," Martin said, ominously.

The party grasped hands; Kazrack in the center, Logan and Ratchis at either end, and stepped through.

They felt their bodies get jerked forward and they pierced the veil of the portal. For a moment it was like being smothered in a damp sheet left out in winter, but they flowed through its porous weave, and then...

...there was nothing. Not light, nor sensation of moving, not even a sense of a body. Just cold eternity in all directions. An eternity passed and there was a square of light and the slightest sense of self in a rigid, frozen body tumbling in an inky void. The square grew bigger until the light was all there was.

Suddenly, the Keepers of the Gate felt themselves crash heavily onto cold stony ground. They gasped in harsh air and tried to disentangle themselves.

"I can't see!" Roland cried.

"I am blind as well," Kazrack said calmly.

"I can feel my eyes are in my head, but... I can't see," Dorn said.

"Magical darkness?" Logan asked. "I can't see either."

"Everyone be careful, we are on some kind of stone plateau," Ratchis said. "The sound of the wind makes me think there is a drop-off nearby. Martin? Are you there?"

Martin groaned. He felt a wave of cold nausea go through his body as he held his hand to his mouth. The stench of rot floated heavily there for a moment and he gagged. Over a dozen of the teeth on the right side of his mouth had fallen out. Rotted.

"I'm blind, too," he gasped.

"What if something attacks us?" Roland asked, a bit of panic in his voice. "I know!" He willed himself to change to his velvet black panther form, and though he still could not see, he was certain his advanced olfactory powers would comfort him, but he was wrong.

The smells here were alien. Though he heard the lapping of water against a shore, he could not smell the sea, rather vinegar, and the air had the faintest smell of death wrapped in the taste of clean snow. He shivered.

"Everyone be quiet!" Ratchis said, untangling from the others to stand. "We need to be quiet and listen in case something does sneak up on us. But we also need to remain still, so none of us accidentally falls off a cliff to their deaths. Just stand where you are..."

"The ledge is over here," Logan said, from the right. "I crawled over and found it. Don't come in my direction, and... Ow! There are some sharp rocks, so be careful."

The rest of the Keepers of the Gate slowly stood.

"Shall I try to dispel the blindness?" Kazrack whispered.

"Let us wait," Martin finally spoke again. "This may be a side-effect of passing between planes. It may pass. Though we should consider in the meantime what we are going to do if we cannot get our vision to return."

“Oh no!” Kazrack exclaimed.

“What is it?” Ratchis hissed.

“Something is not right,” Kazrack sounded almost scared. “It is as if my gods were further away from me. None of the most powerful spells I can cast with the aid of my holy progenitors... I mean, they are gone. I cannot access them!”

Ratchis grunted as he realized the same thing about the miracles he had prepared. Roland growled his dismay.¹²⁷

“Martin?” Ratchis asked.

“My prepared spells seem fine,” Martin said. “It must be the nature of this plane and its relative position to the realm of your gods.”

“That makes no sense!” Kazrack said. “The gods of my people are everywhere my people are. They see all we do.”

“That may be the case, Kazrack,” Ratchis said. “But perhaps your gods and ours have never had a reason to exert their power in this place before.”

“I knew this was a bad idea,” Kazrack said. “We are blind and now less prepared. What do you suppose will happen next?”

There was a long silence. There was only the sound of the wind and the distant water.

Slowly, the blackness of their vision began to turn gray and then there were smudges of muted color, and finally their vision returned.

“Thank Natan-ahb,” Kazrack sighed.

The Keepers of the Gate were awed by what they saw. They were upon a round flat plateau shaved near the top of a jagged piece of black rock that rose out of a green and white luminescent sea. The sea stretched out in every direction, and they could see far as the jagged island they stood upon was nearly half a mile from the water’s surface. Above them was a dark purple sky, with two muted moons of green and yellow. There was a path of narrow steps winding down to an ornate stone bridge that led to the gate of the hexagonal city below them. The city was surrounded by thick and tall walls of white stone, checkered with black in places; the point of where the walls were joined each had a tall tower emerging from it. The city itself was dark, but the pale light of the strange moons revealed an immense pyramid in its center; nearly a sixth of the entire city in size. The city itself was probably over a third of a mile wide at its broadest. It rose out of the green and white sea on bedrock of slate gray speckled with a lighter purple.

“There’s something familiar about this place,” Dorn said, noting a squat black four-sided obelisk about four feet high, covered in silver runes similar to the gold ones they had seen back in the portal room.

Martin the Green got out his journal began to draw a quick map of what he saw.

“This doesn’t look like much of a key room. So, are we going down there?” Logan asked, pointing to the city.

“We need a better view first,” Martin said, and putting aside his journal he began the long process of casting *arcane eye*.

¹²⁷ **DM’s Note:** All priests lose access to their highest-level spells while on this plane. However, when preparing spells while here, they can use their highest-level slots to prepare lower-level spells. Arcane magic is unaffected, but in general the rules regarding how certain spells work may not apply in a pocket plane.

The watch-mage first sent the invisible eye up and over the top of the stone they were on, to follow a narrow path of steps that led up and around to the other side. There, he saw a short wharf that stuck out from the island hundreds of feet above the breaking surface of the water below. The wharf itself was made of some strange blue wood, and the pylons were tied with red and gold rope, but everything looked old and shabby.

Martin told the others what he saw, and then he sent the eye down towards the city gates. He could see a two-story gatehouse as the eye got closer. It had double doors of thick metal; each door inscribed with a rune in the same style of the others they had seen. There was also a handwritten sign posted on the left door. It was sloppily written in smeared ink, and the letters were indecipherable. Martin sent the *arcane eye* over the gatehouse, but the magical projection winked out existence as it crossed the perimeter.

Martin told his companions what happened.

With no other options, the Keepers of the Gate made their way down to the gates of the strange city. The stone bridge reminded all, but Logan and Roland, of the bridge where they had met Dorn.¹²⁸ It was of similar construction, though the stone itself had different qualities, and this bridge was much smaller. It was also in better repair.

Martin the Green cast *comprehend languages* and read the sign aloud. “Travelers to Topaline, prepare a toll or turn away. If you have no gold, bother me not! Twenty-five pieces each thrown over the left side. That’s my price.”¹²⁹

“Off the side of the bridge?” Kazrack said. He walked over to the door and went to knock on it.

“Wait!” Martin said, holding up his hand. “The runes are the door are an abjuration. Don’t touch them.”

“We don’t have twenty-fives pieces of gold,” Ratchis said. “Not even for one of us. We would be hard-pressed to get twenty-five silver for each of us.”

“We have to try,” Martin said.

“We can just try silver and see what happens,” Logan said. “They could just mean gold in the general sense of ‘something of value.’ I mean, everyone knows a ‘piece’ means silver.”¹³⁰

“Yes, I shall pay the toll and go in and reason with whomever is within and negotiate passage for the rest of you,” Kazrack pulled twenty-five silver obleks from a pouch and dropped them over the side of the bridge as close to the gatehouse as possible. Logan leaned over to watch the silver coins twinkle in the luminescence of the strange sea as they tumbled down. Yet, they had not fallen more than twenty feet when they disappeared in flash.

There was click as the doors unlocked and slowly swung open. Beyond was a dark twenty-foot-wide passage to another set of double doors.

Kazrack stepped in.

End of Session #83

¹²⁸ See session #64

¹²⁹ **DM’s Note:** This marks the beginning of an adaptation of “Beyond the Glittering Veil...” by Steven Kurtz from Dungeon #31.

¹³⁰ Remember, most of Aquerra uses a silver standard.

Session #84

*Day One in the Pocket Dimensional Realm of Topaline*¹³¹

Kazrack turned and looked at the others.

“The doors are still open,” he said. “Might as well come.”

Ratchis and Roland stepped in warily, followed by Dorn and Martin. Logan took up the rear. They were in an entrance hall created by the two sets of doors, the gatehouse towers and the upper story of the gatehouse. The inner doors were closed with a thick wooden bar on this side.

There was metal grate above them, and another below their feet, Logan noticed tiny niches along the walls on each side. He stopped and backed up.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go in here,” Logan said.

Ratchis was in the middle of checking the inner doors for magic and detecting none, he shrugged his shoulders and reached to lift the bar.

“Wait!” Logan leapt forward. “Let me check for traps!”

But it was too late, the half-orc’s arms bulged as he hefted the heavy bar off its metal rungs and suddenly the entire entrance way was plunged in darkness.

A voice boomed down from above them, heard through the doors now obscured by the darkness.

”WHO ENTERS THE CITY OF THE ANCIENT MYSTICS?” it asked in a language only Martin could understand due to his spell.

“What did it say?” Kazrack asked.

“What language is that?” Roland asked.

“We should all back out of here,” said Logan.

“We are called the Keepers of the Gate!” Martin the Green called back to the voice. “Do you speak common?”

”WE SPEAK WHATEVER TONGUE IS NEEDED TO ACCOMPLISH OUR TASK,” the voice said. “THE CITY IS CLOSED TO VISITORS. GO!”

“We are on a quest for Hurgun of the Stone and seek the Key Room to his Maze,” Martin replied, taking no heed to the command.

“VERY WELL. STEP FORWARD WHERE WE MAY SEE YOU,” the booming voice said, and they heard the double doors before them click open. Ratchis pushed on the doors and stepped out of the magical darkness and out in the dim light of the city. They were in a walled in courtyard behind the gatehouse, with yet another set of gates that led into the city-proper itself. It was strange tableau, as only the luminescence of the ocean and dim moons and stars above provided light, creating bizarre shadows on the walls. The rest of the Keepers of the Gate followed, spilling into the courtyard, and turning to look up at the spot the voice had seemed to be coming from.

On the battlements above the gatehouse stood a black-robed skeletal figure wearing a golden circlet on his bleached skull. Burning red pin-points of light shone in its eye sockets. It lifted a skeletal hand.

¹³¹ The flow of time in this pocket dimension was not clear to the Keepers of the Gate.

“WE SAID NO VISITORS, ESPECIALLY NOT THOSE THAT DO NOT PAY THE TOLL!” And with that, the skeleton threw the twenty-five silver pieces Kazrack had paid, scattering them into the courtyard with disgust.

Kazrack casted *Magic Circle against Evil* and moved over to cover Martin the Green in its area of effect.

“We should try to find a way up!” Ratchis said, hurrying for a door on the backside of the left gatehouse tower. He threw open the door and bellowed for the others to follow him. Without hesitating Martin hurried through. Logan and Roland were right behind him.

“FLESH BE DUST!” the skeletal guardian cried, and suddenly where Kazrack had been moving to join his friends, there was nothing. Dorn shook his head feeling the slightest pinpricks of dust on his face. His jaw dropped to his chest.

“Kazrack’s been disintegrated!” Logan cried looking back.

“You’ll pay for that!” Roland shook his fist at their foe as he ducked into the gatehouse.

“Hurry up, Dorn!” Ratchis cried to his cohort and then continued into the gatehouse and up the stairs to the upper level. Dorn came out of his shock, still looking at the place where Kazrack had been standing less than a moment before. He made to follow the others but cried out as there was a ‘pop’ in the air above him and a strange creature pounced down clawing at him with hands and feet at once. “Noggle, noggle! Noggle noggle noggle!” It cried wildly.

The creature was small, with a skinny body almost like a child’s, but with an over-sized head and big dewy black eyes and broad deformed ears. It had spindly limbs with over-sized hands and feet that ended in yellowed claws. Its skin was the sickly pink of a baby mouse but covered in weeping sores.

“Noggle, noggle!” another of these creatures appeared above Roland and began to claw at him as well, getting tangled up in the Bastite’s arms.

“Noggle, noggle!” and another two appeared above Ratchis, but the half-orc beat off their attacks, roaring. Martin hurried up the stairs, dagger in hand and stabbed at the creatures to little affect.

“CUT YOUR LOSSES AND FLEE NOW! THERE CAN BE NO VICTORY AGAINST US,” the skeletal guardian boasted.

Martin cried out as one of the strange creatures on Ratchis leapt at him clawing him deeply with all four of its claws. Logan tumbled past Roland to try to get a good shot on the creature attacking the Bastite, but suddenly – ‘Pop! Pop!’ – that one and the one harrying Dorn were gone. They just disappeared. Dorn hurried into the gatehouse.

Ratchis roared with fury as he cut at the bizarre beings with his great sword. He cut one deep and it spurted black oily blood on the stone floor, screeching. It backed off, and the one fighting Martin moved to avoid a follow-up blow from the half-orc. It made a face like it was straining in the outhouse, and suddenly its pores and sores plopped wide open making a sick sucking sound and black viscous liquid, not unlike the blood of its companions, oozed out and dripped off its body, leaving a stain on the floor and wall.

Lentus! Martin chanted, and two of the creatures’ movements became exaggeratedly slow.

Soon everyone was on the second floor fighting the three creatures. Roland had transformed into a panther once again and came bounding into the room. He slipped on the oily substance on the floor and nearly careened into Ratchis. Martin was finding that even when his dagger blows landed, the rubbery consistency of the creatures’ pink skin deflected all but the strongest of blows. Roland was soon having the same troubles with his claws.

“What the hell are these things?” Logan said, as the three creatures appeared and re-appeared in front, behind, above, all the while screeching, “Noggle! Noggle, noggle! Boo!” He was having better luck with his sword blows,

but even these seemed to do less damage than they normally would.¹³²

“Nephthys! Bless my blade that we might defeat these pestering creatures!” Ratchis cried, stepping back to cast *magic weapon* on his masterwork greatsword.

Martin scored a deep stab on one of the little monsters and ‘pop’, it disappeared, clutching its chest where the dagger had punctured him.

“That was for Kazrack!” Martin cried.

Roland managed to grasp one of the creatures in his jaws and was in the process of rending it with all four of his claws at once when, ‘pop’ it disappeared. The panther stuck out his tongue and opened and closed his mouth trying to get rid of the nasty taste of the creature.

It reappeared at the top of the stairs to the battlements, and Roland took off after it, not seeing the patch of the black oil that had been left on the stairs during the confusion of the battle. He slipped again, slamming his head on a stair and sliding halfway back down.

“Nog! Nog! Na-Nog! Nog! Noggle, noggle!” the creature taunted, and leapt backwards through the trapdoor, letting it shut.

Logan took a moment to look around. This area of the gatehouse was some kind of gallery that stretched across over the entranceway the party had come through to enter the courtyard. He guessed the ornate, but now moth-eaten rug on the floor covered a grate on the floor, for a now defunct kiln for boiling oil was built into the right-hand wall. He could see with his *Goggles of Darkvision* that there was another set of stairs up on in the other gatehouse tower that this gallery connected to, and he headed that way.

“They are probably waiting at the top of those stairs,” Logan said, pointing to where Roland was getting back on his four feet. “You keep their attention there and I will come around from this way.”

Martin the Green followed Logan, activating the *rune of light* on the medallion about his neck.

“You go with Ratchis,” Martin said. “I want to get the drop on them with a spell.”

Logan shrugged and went back down the stair to join Ratchis.

Ratchis crept up the stairs, getting around Roland and avoiding the oily patch. He cast *bull’s strength* on himself and then burst through the trapdoor. But there were no creatures there. Instead, he saw three bounding, two amusingly slowly, towards the other trapdoor which was now being opened by Martin.

The watch-mage was startled by the sudden approach of the monsters, but managed to cast a spell, sending a *flame arrow* point blank into the chest of the closest one. The flames seemed to snuff out too quickly as it struck the thing and seemed to have no effect.

Ratchis came running to Martin’s aid. “Noggle!” One of the monsters cried and disappeared. Logan was just beginning to come up to the battlements by the left side trapdoor when it appeared above him and clawed at him viciously.

“Balls!” Logan swore swinging wildly.

Dorn who was at the top of the stairs came back down to help Logan.

The fourth of the monsters appeared above Ratchis, but the half-orc cut the head from it with one sharp blow. Roland bound across the battlements and leapt on one pinning it to the floor with his jaws, grimacing at their horrid

¹³² **DM’s Note:** These creatures had DR 5/blunt.

taste. ‘Pop!’ It disappeared.

The other screeched as Ratchis drove his great sword through its trunk. It hung lifelessly from the blade and Ratchis flung it over the side.

Logan followed Dorn up onto the battlements.

“We were fighting one, but it got away,” Dorn said.

“It was bleeding that black oily shit all over though,” Logan added. “It was near dead.”

There was no sign of the robed skeleton up on the gatehouse roof, but they could look out on the dark city from up here. There was still no sign of life in the city, no lights or sounds. Ratchis thought he saw shadows skating across a patch of dull moonlight, but he could not be sure. What they could see most clearly were broad streets that lead around the perimeter of the city, with other broad streets, like spokes, leading from them and towards the pyramid. One of these penetrating streets began no more than one hundred feet away from the courtyard gate.

“How shall we discover the location of the Key Room in a place so big?” Martin asked.

“Could it be here in the gatehouse somewhere?” Logan asked. “You know... Key... gate...”

“I doubt it,” Martin replied. Ratchis agreed.

“We should make for the pyramid,” The half-orc said in his scratchy voice.

“Pyramids mean undead,” Martin said.

Ratchis nodded.

“But I think we knew that already,” Logan smirked.

“What about Kazrack?” Dorn asked.

“Kazrack is dead,” Ratchis said. “We have no time to mourn him now.”

“And people say *I’m* cold,” Logan quipped.

“He would have wanted us to go on and not endanger our mission,” Ratchis replied.

The Keepers of the Gate made their way back down to the courtyard. They took a closer look at the gallery on the second floor of the gatehouse and were disturbed to discover the true nature of the sculptures they had seen out of the corner of their eyes before. The statues were of people with their bodies twisted into positions of excruciating pain, and the looks on their faces reinforced this. But the pieces were only partially stone, they seemed to be grafted in part to preserved living flesh, and in other places stripped away to raw bone. The most disturbing one was of a man all of stone with his chest cut open, but his spine, lungs and heart were blackened flesh.

At the courtyard gate out to the street they debated if the direct route was best, or if it might be better to skirt the sides and come around to the pyramid some other way. Suddenly, they heard a cry above them as a stout figure came falling out of the darkness, slamming into the cobblestone courtyard, painfully.

Kazrack sat up, but was so stunned he slumped over again.

Kazrack was looking up at the robed skeletal figure when all of a sudden there was a flash of white light and a sensation like his bowels were turning inside out. He found himself in a ten-foot by ten-foot cell. It had stone walls,

except for one which was naught but the bars of the cell. Kazrack pressed his face between the bars to see beyond as best he could. There was a narrow hall running to the left and right, and he could see a door across the way to the left that he hoped led out of this place.

Calling to Natan-ahb, Kazrack softened the stone of the wall where it met the bars and was soon able to push his way through, bending some of the bars in the process. He did not make as little noise as he hoped, but he at least he was free. Two shoves from his shoulder and the door burst open to a short hall that led to a wider marble chamber set up with stone biers and a variety of tools and equipment. The place was lit by many braziers, and there was a kiln of some sort against the left-hand wall, along with piles of clay.

Suddenly two of the twisted child-like creatures appeared above him. “Noggle, noggle!” they cried clawing at him. However, Kazrack’s armor was too tough for them, and he only took superficial wounds. He cleaved one of them open, and it fell against a tray of cutting tools and sent them scattering across the marble floor. It did not get back up.

“I know not what manner of creatures you be, but I shall kill you all if you do not let me go!” Kazrack yelled.

The other one disappeared with a ‘pop’.

A small door in the right-side wall opened and through it crouched the skeletal guardian.¹³³

“YOU DARE TRY TO ESCAPE MY STUDIO?” It said. Its jaw did not move when it spoke. Instead, the voice just projected from it, making the hair rise on the back of Kazrack’s neck.

“Foul undead abomination!” Kazrack cried, grabbing the bag of rune-stones about his neck. “In the name of the Lords and Lady of Mountain, be gone!”

The skeleton gave a weak laugh. “YOUR MEASLY GODS HAVE NO POWER HERE, EARTH-AZER.”

“If my faith is too weak to banish you, then let my strength of arms do it instead,” Kazrack said. He lowered his head and charged at the skeleton.

“*Sagitta Magicus!*” the thing chanted in a whisper and three beams of light slammed into Kazrack’s chest, but he did not slow down. The dwarf thrust his halberd into the skeletal figure driving it back, and then followed it up with a devastating chop to the hip that knocked the thing down.

Kazrack stepped back, realizing that while his halberd was doing okay, a blunt weapon would be that much better, so he strapped the pole-axe to his back and drew his flail. The robed figure staggered to its feet, and before Kazrack could close again to try to finish it, it raised a hand and spoke a word, and there was another flash of white light.

Kazrack looked down to see the courtyard sixty feet below him.

“Eyes of Isis! Kazrack?” Martin swore.

“Kazrack! What happened?” Ratchis asked, hurrying over to him

Kazrack sat up and then slowly stood. He did his best to describe his ordeal.

“We thought you were disintegrated,” Logan said.

“Ah, the thing tried, but was thwarted by the heartiness of the dwarven people,” Kazrack replied.

¹³³ **DM’s Note:** Gantus the Crypt Thing is my conversion + unique flavor of the 1E Fiend Folio monster.

“So, you believe dwarven magic resistance teleported you rather than have you disintegrated?” Martin asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“It seems like that is what happened,” Kazrack nodded in reply. “But I leave the technical arcane bit to those of your dubious profession.”

Martin sighed in response.

Ratchis told Kazrack their plan to go up the main street to the pyramid, but Kazrack was not sure that was wise and wanted to see the layout of the city himself from the gatehouse battlement. After a brief argument, they decided to all go back into the gatehouse and up to the roof. However, on the way up there they were harassed by the three of the strange creatures again.

One of them sliced open Dorn’s brow and sent blood into his eyes, blinding him. Kazrack scored a deep wound on one and it disappeared, only to reappear beside Roland. Still in panther-form, the Bastite bit deep into its leg nearly ripping it off. “Noggle!” the thing squealed and disappeared.

Ratchis whipped around to cut at one clawing down his back and with a ‘pop’ it disappeared and reappeared behind him again. Again, the half-orc swung around and sent it flying against the wall with the weight of his sword blow. The thing’s head wavered back and forth as if I were dizzy and then ‘pop’, it disappeared.

Martin helped Dorn wash the blood from his eyes.

Up on the battlements, they looked out on the city the best they could. The two moons seemed to be setting and the luminescence of the ocean was dimming, making it hard to see.

“It is better we get there as quickly as possible than wander darker side streets and perhaps get lost or more easily ambushed,” Ratchis said.

“If there are undead shadows in this city, I wonder why they have not come here yet? In the silence of this place, it is certain our voices and the sound of combat carries,” Kazrack wondered aloud. “Perhaps there is something about this place that keeps them at bay.”

“Perhaps,” Martin replied.

The Keepers of the Gate went back down to the courtyard, and Ratchis made to open the gate into the city, and then stopped.

“Hey Logan? Remember what you said before about checking doors?” Ratchis asked the young Herman-lander. “Wanna check this one?”

End of Session #84 ¹³⁴

¹³⁴ **DM’s Note:** This session ended early for some reason. I think it might have been because someone had missed the session and someone else had to leave early, thus invoking our ‘cannot play with two or more people missing’ rule.

Session #85

They sprinted across the broad boulevard and down the thoroughfare that led to the pyramid and the center of the city. They left the gate behind. There had been no trap that Logan's skill could find, and none was set off. Ratchis took the lead, with Logan on his heels, while Roland lagged behind keeping Kazrack company. Martin and Dorn were in the middle ranks.

The streets were stained white stone, yellowed and gray in many places, and scored with branching cracks that varied in width. In some places, holes two and three feet deep, and many more feet wide had formed. The buildings to each side were made of similar material, though they seemed grayer than the street itself. The lower floors of these structures were built partially into the ground and the entrance ways were at the bottom of narrow shadowy alleys. Their style reminded Ratchis of the bizarre giants' homes he had seen when the Keepers of the Gate were returning from Nikar.¹³⁵ However, the upper floors were built with great open balconies, though many of these were cracked and did not look safe to walk on or under. The buildings were built packed together, creating narrow serpentine stepped alleys that descended into an abyss of shadow.

The lights of the medallions about Martin and Dorn's necks bounced as they hustled, keeping a rapid pace punctuated by Ratchis' barks to keep up. The street was about one hundred and twenty feet wide and growing darker by the moment. The luminescence of the ocean was nearly gone, and its residual light barely bled over the tops of the buildings.

They had barely made it a quarter of the way to the pyramid when a figure came shambling out one of the narrow alleys on the left. It was tall and lanky, and long natty hair shook in the cold air.

"Zombies!" Ratchis warned.

"We should just hustle past these," Kazrack said. "They are slow and pose no real threat if we just avoid them."

Another tall shambling figure appeared from the left, and six more from the right, and three more were closing off retreat from the rear.

"Uh, oh," Martin said, pointed up. "Look! The roof!"

There were five more of the figures on the roof of one of the buildings to the left. They held spears high over their heads, and a moment later, a rain of spears came down around the Keepers of the Gate. Ratchis felt a spear bite his hip.

"Keep moving!" Ratchis roared. "Don't slow down!"

The zombies on the right came leaping at them, spears outstretched, displaying a speed and coordination none in the group had ever seen in a zombie. They had pale green skin and solid yellow eyes, and sinewy bodies; most of them were over six feet tall. They wore the tattered remains of white togas, though some wore nothing at all.

Logan stepped back and fired arrows at the rushing zombies, but even those that struck them through the neck or eye seemed to do little good.¹³⁶

"*Lentus!*" Martin chanted and the charging undead jerked awkwardly, as if suddenly they had been transformed into the kind of zombies the Keepers of the Gate were used to.

The ones on roof began to climb down off the buildings headfirst, looking like desiccated grasshoppers.

"That's not right," Logan said, putting away his bow and drawing his sword. The pace of the party was slowing

¹³⁵ See Session #74

¹³⁶ **DM's Note:** Corporeal undead (as opposed to skeletal or non-corporeal) all have DR 5/slashing, as piercing their organs and breaking their bones do little to stop them. Cutting them to pieces is the most efficient way of defeating them.

now.

Roland called for Bast's *divine power*, and Kazrack grabbed his bag of rune-stones and channeled the pure power of the divine in wave, calling out in dwarven, "Natan-ahb! Do not forsake me, even though I feel that I am farther from you than I have ever been!"

Tears filled his eyes as nothing happened. In the distance they though the heard the echo of a shrill laugh.

"Get behind me, Martin," the dwarf said, taking a moment to wipe his eyes before bringing his halberd to bear. The watch-mage obeyed, as Ratchis and Logan slowed their pace to form a line with Kazrack and Dorn, to meet the coming zombies. The watch-mage reached into his *bag of tricks*, but there was no fuzzy ball within. He looked in, shocked.

"My bag of animals does not function here!" Martin cried in dismay.

Putting the bag away, he began to scoop up some of the loose chunks of the street and hurl them over his companions' heads at the zombies.

Roland ripped at one of the ones that came up from behind, braving through the disgusting taste of undead flesh as he chomped and clawed it to pieces. He soon moved on to another, using his great speed to catch back up with the others when he fell behind.

Zombies were swarming in from the left, and Dorn soon found himself surrounded on three sides, slashing futilely as the zombies slammed him over and over with their calcified fists. The cohort withdrew allowing Ratchis to step up and cleave the head off one and send another to the ground.

"Turn these things!" Ratchis barked at Kazrack. The laughter was on the air again and it seemed to be closer and above them, hidden in the darkness of the night.

"Natan-ahb! If you deem me worthy reach out to this far realm and aid me!" Kazrack called to his god, but again his faith was short of the task.¹³⁷

"Oh, no!" Dorn cried looking up, and then he stumbled back as the fist of zombie caught him in the chin and another slammed him in the ribs. "Shadows! Shadows!"

Dorn fell back again and Ratchis twirled into his position, cleaving a zombie nearly in two by brute strength alone, his great sword tearing through dead flesh at an angle. A vaguely humanoid shadow came diving out of the night, swooping at Dorn. He felt the cold touch and the strength of his limbs seemed sapped.

The battle was chaos, and the Keepers of the Gate lost any momentum they had towards the pyramid. A second shadow kept Kazrack busy, so the dwarf put away his halberd and drew his flail. Logan was separated from the others and fighting three zombies on his own, and Ratchis and Dorn were back-to-back, fighting to keep from getting flanked. The first shadow came back for another pass shrieking like a grieving woman, but this time Dorn ducked. Martin the Green kept flinging stones at zombies, helping Roland who was trying to keep them away from Kazrack so the dwarf could deal with the shadow. The Bastite tore through them, but it still did not seem fast enough against the great number of them.

"This place is a Ra-damned city of the dead!" Logan cursed, jerking his sword out of the neck of one of the zombies and tumbling about it to avoid the spear-thrust of another.

"Richard the Red knew he was sending us here!" Kazrack accused. "I knew this was a bad idea!" And with that he struck home with his flail and the shadow shrieked and retreated, disappearing into the darkness for moment only to come around for another attack.

¹³⁷ **DM's Note:** Since this pocket plane exists within the plane of Void (i.e., the Negative Material Plane) all undead gain +4 turn resistance that stacks with any existing turn resistance.

Dorn was not so lucky and twice more he felt the strength-sapping cold of the shadow's touch.

"Dorn!" Ratchis cried. The two of them had become separated again, and the warrior had fallen over punch-drunk from the many blows he suffered. Two of the zombies were dragging his seizing form off towards one of the alleys. The half-orc plowed past two of the zombies and sliced a hunk of oozing darkness from the shadow. It hurled itself through the air away from Ratchis and towards Kazrack, and the dwarf felt the satisfying catch of his flail in the essence of the incorporeal undead that told him the magic of his weapon had damaged it. It croaked and then faded away into nothing.

Ratchis cut the arm from one of the zombies dragging Dorn, and Roland leapt upon the other driving it back as the panther ripped the desiccated veins and cracking sinew in the thing's neck. But still more zombies came pressing in on the two priests with their spears. They acted with intelligence and moved to flank and trip the adventurers. They went for the weakest opponents, trying to separate the others from Dorn.

"Ratchis!" Kazrack cried, feeling the cold touch of the other shadow again. The flail began to feel heavy in his hands. The shadow flew at Martin, but the watch-mage's *mage armor* kept the incorporeal thing from getting at him. "Ratchis, only your weapon can defeat that shadow! I grow too weak."¹³⁸

The friar of Nephthys spun around to survey the situation, as five of the zombies, each as strong as Kazrack or Ratchis slammed at him. Roland had healed Dorn and was dragging him towards Martin, to have the watch-mage watch over him. Logan was struggling against three zombies, though two were destroyed at his feet, and Kazrack kept two at bay as the shadow was swooping down for another attack.

"I will fall if I do not dispatch these zombies first!" the half-orc said to his companion.

"Oof!" Ratchis tasted blood in the back of his mouth as he felt a spear head enter his lower back. He nearly fell to his knees but managed to spin around and drop the zombie who had dealt the blow. However, this left him open and he felt the bite of two more spears and the heavy blows of zombie fists as he went down.

"Roland! Cure D'nar!" Kazrack said, crushing the kneecap of a zombie and finishing it off with a blow to the head as it went down. But the dwarf shuddered again, sliding to the cold stone ground as he felt the touch of the shadow again.

"Natan-ahb, please hear me though my voice is as weak as my body and though I am far from the First Mountain. Please grant me your light and power that I may banish these creatures, if not for myself then for my stalwart companions who only seek to help the helpless and defend the innocent."

Kazrack felt the divine energy burst from him and the zombies moaned their displeasure as they turned to flee. The shadow shrieked again and took off straight for the sky.

Logan and Roland finished the last three zombies that had not fled and the Keepers of the Gate quickly re-grouped.

Kazrack was so weakened that he was unable to lift the weight of his own armor and there was no time to remove it, so with a word from Martin, the dwarf *levitated* a few feet off the ground. Once Ratchis was conscious again, thanks to the graces of Bast, he tied a rope about Kazrack's shoulders so he might be pulled along. He then gently lifted the still unconscious Dorn, and draped him upon the dwarf, even though he too was feeling drained of strength.¹³⁹

The Keepers of the Gate continued their hustle towards the pyramid, Dorn and Kazrack in tow.

"How humiliating," Kazrack groaned.

¹³⁸ Ratchis' great sword had *magic weapon* cast upon it.

¹³⁹ **DM's Note:** Those that are brought back from negative hit points by means of magic (instead of actual rest) are considered exhausted (-6 Str and Dex).

More zombies fell in behind them. They were crouched as they hustled to catch up, spears held relaxed and readied in their dry cracked hands. These zombies were a far cry from the hundreds of mindless loping things the party had destroyed in the Necropolis of Doom.¹⁴⁰

Soon the great plaza at the center of the city was coming into view, the pyramid looming above all other structures, including the city walls itself. Ratchis noticed two tall statues flanking the end of the street. They were of tall figures holding spears straight up and down before them. The figures were about nine feet high, but they were on pedestals nearly seven feet high. The statues were carved of a white stone, and the figures looked human, with white togas similar to the tatters the zombies wore, but with cowled hoods that covered their faces.

It was then that Ratchis noticed a line of zombies moving to block the way to the pyramid plaza.

“The statues radiate moderate magic,” Martin warned, having seen them too. “We should not go between them.”

“We have no choice,” Kazrack complained, as the rope holding him was passed to the watch-mage so Ratchis could hold his sword in two hands and get ready to face the zombies blocking their path. Suddenly, there was a rain of spears again, as another half-dozen zombies appeared on the roof of a building on the right.

“Meow! Meow! Meow! Meow! Meow!” Roland said to Ratchis, so the half-orc cast *speak with animals* to communicate with his companion.

“There are no zombies in the plaza,” Roland explained. “I think the magic of the statues is keeping them out of there.”

Ratchis relayed this information to the others.

“Can we be sure?” Martin the Green asked.

“We have to risk it,” Ratchis replied.

“I agree,” Kazrack said weakly.

Ratchis called on Nephthys to grant him *bull's strength* and then cut a path through the zombies. Martin hurried past as the half-orc held the undead at bay, drawing Kazrack and Dorn behind him. Roland ripped through another zombie to help them get by safely. Martin stopped and looked at the pyramid.

A broad cobblestone plaza surrounded the great structure. It was built of huge sedimentary bricks pocked with tiny pebbles and grit, and the top of it was not a point, but rather was cut open and flat and from it sprung countless vines, branches, flowers, roots and leaves that covered the vast majority of the pyramid all the way down to the street level. Great thorny bushes were growing along the base of it, and along a steep set of stairs that led up the side to stone double doors. Upon the doors was the raised sigil of a great tree in a ring.

Logan had stopped to hold off a few of the pursuing zombies that had caught up and soon found himself surrounded. He suffered a few nasty wounds but was finally able to tumble out of the mob and into the plaza followed by Ratchis and Roland. Another volley of spears followed them, and both Ratchis and Logan cried out in pain, but the zombies could not follow into the plaza. They moaned in dissatisfaction, walking back and forth along the invisible barrier.

“There is a dweomer upon the door as well!” Martin warned the others as he began to climb the steps. Roland came up beside him.

“Point me towards the door and I shall try to dispel it,” Kazrack said. Martin obliged the dwarf, but the call to his gods failed.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ See Sessions #40 thru #49

¹⁴¹ **DM's Note:** Kazrack's player (John G.) has rolled terribly throughout most of the campaign. It was a running joke for a while, and we could never get him to change his set of dice to something more effective. Later in the campaign, when his bag was

There was another rain of spears on Ratchis and Logan as they reached the bottom of the steps. More zombies had appeared on the nearby roofs, and while they could not enter the plaza, they still had a good angle for throwing their spears.

Roland roared his prayer, attempting to dispel the magic upon the doors as well, but he failed, too.

”We’re too much in the open here!” Ratchis said. “We should take cover around the other side of the pyramid!”

“Ratchis, can you...Urk!” Martin had turned to the half-orc, and suddenly he felt the sharp heat of many needles shooting into his back.

Roland roared a warning. As more spears clattered about them, Ratchis saw humanoid creatures rising out of the thorn bushes to join the one that had attacked Martin. They seemed to be made of fibrous material like the inside of a tree, but a dull gray color, and covered with thousands of tiny needles. Their faces only had the vaguest of features, except for pointed ears, like crude parodies of an elf.

The four needlemen ¹⁴² tensed and another barrage of needles rained on the Keepers of the Gate. Roland winced as he bit down on one, ripping a huge chunk of its leg to little effect. Ratchis bound up the stairs and hacked at one of the needlemen, closing his eyes as he felt the prick of a half dozen needles hit his face and chest. Blood washed down his face in thin streams of sweat.

Logan followed and hacked at one on the other side. Roland finished the one he was grappling with; needles sticking out of his snout and haunch.

“Ratchis! Your Key!” Martin reminded the friar.

Ratchis leapt past the strange plant men and grabbed the large key he carried attached to his chain belt holy symbol.

There was a clatter of more spears from the zombies, but they could no longer reach without being very lucky. But three more of the needlemen rose in the bushes further away from the stair, and soon everyone was bleeding from many needle wounds. Individually, the needles did little damage, but in a buzzing cloud, the pain was quite distracting and the tiny wounds bloody.

“Nephthys!” Ratchis pressed the end of the key against the stone doors. “Unlock these bonds and set aside any wards that might keep us from entering this temple shaped like those of ancient days and that holds the undead menace at bay!”

The door clicked.

“It is still radiating as magical,” Martin said, running up to stand beside Ratchis.

“It only temporarily dampens any traps,” Ratchis said. “The magic is still there. We must hurry.”

Ratchis pulled the door open a few inches and shoved Martin inside, even as more needles were fired at them. He ran back down the steps and grabbed Dorn and Kazrack, as Roland and Logan slipped through the doors as well; the latter holding them open for the half-orc and his burden.

Logan kicked the doors shut and pressed his back to them.

In a moment, the Keepers of the Gate were in a small dark foyer, slumped against the cold stone floor.

stolen, losing his dice and D&D books, he was forced to borrow dice from other people, and began to roll a hell of a whole lot better.

¹⁴² **DM’s Note:** Anyone keeping track of how many 1E Fiend Folio monsters I’ve used in this campaign?

The foyer was decorated with a mosaic made from tiny colored tiles in shades of green, yellow and white. The scene of great hill with a tree atop it and many animals gathered about it, covered the floors and ceiling. There were no windows, but the slightest breeze came through a slit in the thick burgundy curtain closing the foyer off from whatever was beyond.

Martin the Green stood and began to walk over to the curtain.

“Martin, wait!” Ratchis called in a harsh whisper.

“Can you use your magical eye to see if it is safe beyond the curtain?” Kazrack asked.

Martin nodded. “But it will take ten minutes to cast.”

Martin sat back on the floor with his back to the wall and began the low slow chanting of the *arcane eye* spell.

The song of a bird wafted in from the other side of the curtain.

“We are going to have to rest here,” Kazrack said. “We seem to have little choice.”

“I just hope that time *does* run more slowly here,” Ratchis replied. “If we rest here even one day and time is the same here as back in Aquerra, we have lost our chance to find out how to get into Hurgun’s Maze. And we haven’t even found the Key Room yet.”

“I said we should not come,” Kazrack croaked.

“Too late for that, Kazrack,” Logan said.

The dwarf was so weak it took all his energy to shrug. “At this point, I can only hope that the gods are arranging things in our favor.”

What little healing the party had left was spread around, and Dorn finally awoke up in a weakened state. Kazrack and Ratchis argued about the latter using a healing potion.¹⁴³

“I will not waste it on myself,” Ratchis insisted. “At least not now. Someone else may end up needing it more.”

“Is someone there?” a voice came booming from beyond the curtain. It was deep and seemed to have a gurgling echo. “Raaaawoooo, hroom, if someone is there come out...”

Everyone looked at each other nervously.

“Martin, if you stop casting will the spell be lost?” Kazrack asked. Martin nodded without stopping his casting.

“Then stay here,” Kazrack said. “Ratchis, perhaps you should announce us.”

“Who is it that calls us?” Ratchis called, creeping over to the curtain, to take a peek.

“Should it not be I who asks you, my unexpected guests, who *you* are,” the voice asked. “Hrmmm, humm... Yes, yes... That is how it should be. Hum.”

“We are called the Keepers of the Gate,” Ratchis called, leaning away from the curtain when he spoke to not give away his position.

“Oh! Hum. Oh!” the voice cried. “Ratchis, Kazrack, Martin... Come out! Your visit is *not* as unexpected as I first

¹⁴³ This was one of the potions found in the backpack along with the *Prayer Rug of the Wayfarer* near the lair of the Hooked Horrors in Session #68.

thought. No. No. Hrmmm. Haw.”

Ratchis looked back at Kazrack. The dwarf was finished removing his armor and dropped all his gear in one corner. Now he could walk on his own, if still with great difficulty.¹⁴⁴ The dwarf dragged his feet over to Ratchis and Roland was alongside of them. Logan stood and raised his sword. He had never put it away.

Ratchis pulled the curtain aside and there was a collective gasp.

Beyond was a great chamber that revealed the pyramid was but a shell. Within it was green verdant hill with clumps of small trees and fragrant flowers. There was a trickling stream, and wisps of cloud dripping tiny rains here and there. At the end of the hill was a great tree over forty feet across, and so tall it went out the cut-off top of the pyramid. It was the source of vines and branches that came down the outside.

Strangest of all, was the dull glowing orb, like a tiny moon floating up near the tallest branches of the tree, giving the room just enough silvery ambient light to make out shapes in the chamber, and finer details close up.

The Keepers of the Gate, sans Dorn and Martin, took a few steps deeper into the strange chamber, and towards the hill and tree. A bird cawed, and three chipmunks chased each other in circles and then disappeared behind some rocks on the other side of the stream.

“We have come forth,” Kazrack called. “Now, who is it that calls to us?”

“Come closer,” the low voice rumbled down the hill. It seemed to be coming from the top of the hill by the tree. As the party stepped forward, the tree’s branches began to move, and they could now see a myriad of objects that were tied with white bows into the branches of the tree, here and there. Mostly there were sacks and bags of various kinds, but they also saw swords, suits of armor, musical instruments, statuettes, bells and chimes, and other things.

The trunk twisted and turned as they approached taking the form of a misshapen face, with deep knots for eyes, a moving hollow for a mouth, and curling bits of bark for a nose.

“I am Chochokpi,” the tree said. They could feel the rumble of his voice in their bodies. “I am the Tree that Grows Backwards.”

“Greetings, Chochokpi,” Kazrack said to the tree.

“Being a tree that can talk to humans and all, can you understand me?” Roland asked in a panther’s yowls and growls.

“Of course,” the great tree said, its stand-in for a face twisting to address the Bastite. “But who are you, follower of the Cat Queen? Where is Jana?”

“Dead,” Kazrack replied.

“Wait... How do you...?” Ratchis began.

“And Martin the Green?” Chochokpi asked.

“I am here,” Martin said, coming up the hill behind the others with Dorn; his eyes were wide with wonder and excitement. “You seem to know us...”

“Ooh! Ooh! I like this place!” Thomas chittered in Martin’s mind. The squirrel familiar leapt out of the watch-mage’s hood and scurried about in the grass happily, and then scrambled up the side of the great tree.

“I am glad to see you again, honored watch-mage, but Jana’s absence distressing me... Hrmm. Ho. Heh. Yes.

¹⁴⁴ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack’s Strength score was down to a 2.

<grumble> Very distressing. And Jeremy?”

“Jeremy is dead as well,” Kazrack said.

“No, hrm. Hoom. Heh. That is certainly not right,” Chochokpi’s voice fell so deep it could hardly be understood. The sounds he made between syllables were an unpleasant bass buzzing. “No. That is not right. And Sebastian?”

“We know no Sebastian,” Kazrack replied.

“I am Logan,” Logan said, stepping forward. “Do you know of me?”

“Why... Hrm. Hrm. Yes... yes, of course,” the tree grumbled. He turned the face on his trunk to see Dorn. “But not this one...”

“Perhaps we have not met this ‘Sebastian’ yet,” Kazrack said. “But tell me great Tree, Chochokpi, how is it you know us?”

“Oh... Oh... Yes... Haw. Hrm. Hroom. Hrum. I nearly forgot...” Chochokpi let out a low rumbling laugh that shook through his roots and nearly knocked the Keepers of the Gates on their asses. “You see... Hrm. While this is the *first* time you are meeting me, this is the *second* time I am meeting you. The next time you meet me will be the *second* time you meet me... Hrm. Hroom. Of course... But it will be the *first* time I meet you.”

There was a long silence broken only by the sound of crickets coming from the other side of the hill.

“I am the Tree the Grows Backwards,” Chochokpi added.

“So, if you grow backwards, you know us from the future?” Martin the Green asked the tree, skepticism in his voice.

“Hrm. Yes... You would call it ‘past’... Yes, yes, that is the proper word from your... Hrm... Point of view,” Chochokpi replied.

Kazrack fell to his knees, fatigue overcoming him, as Roland crept forward and began to drink of the cool refreshing water that collected in the small divots in the great tree’s roots.

“The cat has the right idea,” Chochokpi said to the dwarf. “Drink.” And with that the tree lowered a branch and wrapped it around Kazrack’s waist, lifted him off the ground. The others were startled by the tree’s sudden moment, but before anyone could do anything rash, the dwarf was being gently hung over one of the pools to be allowed to drink. Kazrack felt the strength returning to his limbs; perhaps not all that had been lost, but enough to take the edge off his tiredness, and his wounds began to slowly close.¹⁴⁵

Chochokpi’s limb gently let go of the dwarf, and Kazrack stood and walked back over to his friends, smiling.

Roland purred his pleasure as well.

“Have you given this water its healing properties?” Kazrack asked.

“I am the Tree that Grows Backward,” Chochokpi said as if that explained it all. “In the end I shall be the Seed, ready to explode again.”

Kazrack looked to Martin, who shrugged.

“Will it keep its properties if taken from this place?” Kazrack asked.

¹⁴⁵ **DM’s Note:** Drinking from Chochokpi’s pools acted as both a lesser restoration spell and a Regenerate Light Wounds spell that could be used once per day per drinker.

“Fill your vials if you like,” the tree responded. “But its properties will not last forever.” Kazrack filled two vials right away.

“We are honored to meet such an elder being as you,” Ratchis said to the tree, speaking for the first time, his head bowed.

“So, Chochokpi,” Martin said. “You have met us before, and you grow backwards, are you always here?”

“Hrm. No,” The great tree’s voice was not something one got used to. “But I am in more than one place, sometimes. Hrm. Yes... Yes... Or at least it would seem that way... Hard to explain to those that grow frontways... Yes, yes, it is...”

There was another long silence in response to this.

“Hrm. You must be tired by your...Hrum. Hrum... ordeal arriving here.” Chochokpi said. “But when we first meet you told me a way I could aid you, so when morning... Huh! Morning, be it as it may be in this place... When it comes, I shall give you that aid as you yourselves requested. But now... Rest.”

“But where did we meet you the first...uh, I mean, the *second* time?” Martin asked.

“Oh. Hrm. Yeah... Hurgun’s Maze... Or least, that is what you would call it... Yes...” the tree responded. “Now rest. You are safe here. Yes, very safe.”

The Keepers of the Gate chose an area enclosed by half a dozen small flowering trees to make camp in. The evening here was cold, but they did not dare make a fire. Huddled on their bedrolls, Roland transformed back into human-shape, and they fell to discussing this revelation.

“Can what this tree says be true?” Kazrack asked.

“I am willing to trust Chochokpi; what he says is unusual, perhaps improbable, but it is no less improbable than anything else we’ve encountered,” Martin replied.

“But why does he not recognize Roland or Dorn?” Logan asked.

“Perhaps they do not come with us to Hurgun’s Maze,” Martin speculated. “Dorn has already said before that he has not made up his mind about going.”

“But I have no such doubts,” Roland said.

“Perhaps something fundamental has changed,” Kazrack said, confusion in his voice. “I am not sure how to explain it, but maybe there are different versions of events this time around. Are not the forces of time something even gods refrain from dabbling in?”

“Or alternate timelines? Alternate primes?” Martin sat up and shrugged. “We touched on such planar theory at the Academy, but not much of it. Though we may want to consider another possibility, perhaps Dorn and Roland die in the Maze before we ever meet Chochokpi, if so, they may want re-consider entering it.”

“I won’t be scared off by speculation,” Roland said.

“Notice he did not mention Beorth,” Kazrack said.

Martin shrugged again. “There are too many possibilities to spend too much time considering it.”

“But you made sure to mention the possibility that included my death, *thanks*,” Roland spat.

“Sorry...” Martin replied, shrugging his shoulders again.

Day Two in the Pocket Dimensional Realm of Topaline

In morning the glowing moon-orb was gone. It was replaced by a larger golden shining orb that gave the entire chamber the light and warmth of a mid-summer morning. There were birds singing, and little animals chittering here and there. A lone wolf drank from the stream, ignoring three small deer that grazed nearby.

Roland woke up extra early to transform into his black panther form, parts of his fur shining purple in the strange sunlight, to frolic in the tall grass and drink of the stream. He chased rabbits, but pawed them playfully, his claws retracted, and tumbled with a small black bear.

Drinking from a pool by Chochokpi's roots as his companions began to awaken, the Bastite heard the deep voice of the strange tree address him in the speech of cats.

"Roland of Bast... Hrm..." Chochokpi said. "Where is it you come from? How did you join ranks with the Keepers of the Gate? Yes... yes... that's what they call themselves..."

"Nikar," Roland replied. "I am not from there, but I have spent many of my recent years there."

"Hurm, huh... No, that's not right..." Chochokpi murmured, his voice growing nearly inaudible, with an almost sleepy quality to his voice. "The heroes never went there... No, no they never did... not before the last time..."

"What does that mean?" Roland asked.

"Huh? Oh! Hrm. Well, could mean many things, none of which I know," the tree replied. "But things are changing, that's for sure... Yes, yes... Certainly. Tell your companions to return to me when they are ready, and the tale shall be told and the gifts shall be given."

"Gifts?" Roland asked.

"Yes, gifts from your future selves," Chochokpi said. "There won't be one for you, I'm afraid."

Roland crept back to others, dejectedly. The party's priests prepared spells and a great amount of healing was dispensed.

"I have prepared almost nothing but spells of healing," Kazrack told Ratchis.

"As have I, but it seems like that is what we need," Ratchis replied. "But keep some in reserve. Not having other spells available will mean that if we have to fight, we are more likely to get wounded again."

Kazrack nodded.

"I still haven't decided what to do," Chochokpi said when the Keepers of the Gate had gathered about his strange face once again to eat fruit and nuts and drink thick nectar from broad leaves rolled up into cones that the tree provided. "About the things that have changed... It is a lot to decide in a short frontways time. Hrm. And frontways time is always a hard time to think in... But that would make no sense to you... No, no, it wouldn't."

"Chochokpi, you said you first met us in Hurgun's Maze?" Martin the Green asked. Thomas leapt up on his master's head and chittered happily, returning from a night among the squirrels that lived among Chochokpi's boughs.

"In, but not in... No, not exactly in... But through... But you might say in... We shall say, yes... In."

Martin looked at the others and Kazrack shook his head. Ratchis, however, nodded. He seemed awed to be in this

thing's presence.¹⁴⁶

"Did that make sense to you?" Logan asked Dorn. Dorn shrugged his shoulders.

"When we met the first time...for me it was first...for you the second... You had to convince me to help you...to take items and information from you so that I might give it to you in the first place, which is what I plan to do," the tree continued.

"How did we convince you?" Kazrack asked.

"It was not a lot that you asked of me. No, no... It was not..." Chochokpi said. "But since it will be the first time I meet you when you do I could not tell you. I was thinking frontways time then and it is very difficult. As, hrm... Yes. Difficult now. But I can tell you that when you gave me the items you had not faced your final foe yet in the effort to free Hurgun."

"Hurgun is trapped?" Martin asked.

"Hmm, yes... Trapped by his own arrogance... Hrm, yes... He was not satisfied to serve the oh...stone, and not satisfied to control fire and water and air. He needed to control the fifth element. Time."

"How did he seek to do that?" Kazrack asked. "Foul magic?"

"Hmm? Oh, foul? Fair? I know not... I only know what you will tell me," Chochokpi said. "I only know he was attempting to bind a time elemental to his will when something went wrong and that was why his Maze disappeared and he was thought to have abandoned it for this bit of... hrm...frontways time."

"What else did we tell you?" Martin asked. "We must have told of what we faced in the Maze in order to help us be prepared. Right?"

"Hrm. Huh? No, no, no... Never did," the tree replied. "Afraid you'd change too much if you knew too much. Yes, yes... On that we agreed and insisted... though... Hmm, now that I see so much that has changed maybe having you tell me to tell you would not have been so bad... But with the uh... thinking in frontways time it all gets muddled anyway."

Martin's shoulders sagged.

"Time is a dangerous and fragile element, it is... Hmm, yes, yes, fragile..." the tree continued. "When I give you these gifts you must swear to return them to me in the same conditions you received them, so that I might have them to give to you again later, or else... Oh! Paradox! No, no... Distortions! Bad changes. Oh! Hrm. It is for that reason that I am not sure what to do with the items for those who are not here."

"We should take those as well," Kazrack said. "If they need to be returned to you to give to us, we should have them."

"Or I should have them all along... Hrm..." The tree was silent for a time, as were the Keepers of the Gate. "Ah, urm...Well, I might as well give the things that belong to those of you who are here.

Chochokpi's branches began to shake, and all the items tied up in the white bows among them shook and jingled as well, as he brought his limbs around to lower items one at a time, calling to each of the members of party to them.

"Ratchis, called D'nar," Chochokpi rumbled, as he lowered a dull-green hued belt made of some kind of bumpy hide, but covered in a clear sheen. It was decorated with a gold buckle inscribed with dwarven runes. "This is

¹⁴⁶ **DM's Note:** Ratchis' player was not present for all or most of this session (the memory is foggy). So, I used the excuse of Ratchis' awe (as a ranger and nature-lover) as a way for him to not voice his opinions as often as he usually does.

Frojack's Belt."¹⁴⁷

"Thank you," Ratchis said, bowing his head as he took the belt.

"Hmmm. There is one other thing, Ratchis. Something you asked me to tell you in this place," Chochokpi intoned. "When we first met...hmm...second time for you... You had not made your, hmmm... choice, but perhaps you should think about where your heart is in terms of your father's people."

"What choice?" Ratchis asked.

"I don't know, but it weighed on you," Chochokpi said, getting very low again. "Herm, heh... Yes, it did."

Ratchis showed the others his belt.

"Logan!" the tree called, and he lowered down a pair of soft ankle-high boots that were tied to the white bow by the laces. "These are *Yossel's Quickling-killing Boots.*"¹⁴⁸

Logan took down the boots looking happier than anyone in the group had ever seen him. He immediately sat down to put them on and found that they grew to perfectly fit his feet.

Martin's gift came in a silken bag tied with its white bow. It held something heavy and solid and cube shaped.

"This is the rare and powerful, *Wurfel Craft,*" Chochokpi said, as Martin drew out a worn stone cube about two inches to a side and carved with detailed images on each face that were different, but contiguous.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ This great belt is decorated with a gold buckle inscribed with dwarven runes. These runes represent the names of the members of the troll-slaying organization the Petrified Tree that attempted to slay the Great Troll Frojack in 479 H.E. All members of the Petrified Tree but the half-elf wizard Tezen Tallamar were slain in that assault. Tallamar escaped with a strip of Frojack's hide that was later fashioned into a belt of strength and worn by the dwarven warrior Abimilech Shornson, said to be a descendant of Dwitak Chem, the last of the true dwarven kings. The belt is said to have a minor curse upon it, in that the great troll strength kept within tends to exhaust the wearer's fortitude. The wearer of this belt gains a +6 enhancement bonus to strength. However, the wearer also suffers a -4 penalty to all Constitution-based checks. Donning the belt is a standard action; removing it is a free action. When removed, the wearer suffers from fatigue until he or she rests for one full hour.

¹⁴⁸ Yossel the gnomish ranger is one of the few heroes of the gnomish people who is known beyond a small locality. Originally from the Spice and Thread Islands during the Quickling Skirmishes of the Third Age, he was a great hero of that war, and used his boots to great effect to slay a great number of the gnomes' natural enemies. After the war, he traveled Aquerra visiting other gnomish communities and helping them defend themselves from enemies. He ultimate fate was never learned, but the legends say he was last seen in Derome-Delem. As a free action, the wearer of these boots can click his heels together, enabling him to act as if affected by *haste* spell for up to 15 rounds a day. These rounds need not be consecutive; however, every time the boots' effect is turned off, the wearer must make a Fortitude save (DC 15 + number of consecutive rounds used) or be fatigued. If the save throw is a natural '1', then the wearer is exhausted instead. These boots magically shrink and grow in size to fit those from Tiny to Medium size. When not worn, they always appear to be about the right size for a gnome.

¹⁴⁹ This worn stone cube is about two inches to a side and carved with detailed images on each face that are different, but contiguous. The six sides are as follows: 1. An image of Isis as she was depicted in Third Age Thracia. 2. Vines with broad, torn leaves, 3. Intertwining vines covered in plump grapes, 4. A wooden ivy-covered gate, 5. A sundial among tall grass, 6. A still pond. *The Wurfel Kraft* was enchanted by Albreda Funt, the former Master of Wards of the Academy of Wizardry, early in the Fourth Age. She based the device on similar items common to the heads of households of the wizardhold estates of the Spice and Thread Islands during the time of Agon the God-King. Pressing one of the item's sides creates a transparent, colored cube of pure force, ten feet on a side, that prevents certain forms of objects and attacks from entering. The type of protection thus afforded corresponds with the side touched. Only one side may be used at a time. The transparent barrier moves with the wielder, though certain versions may slow his movement some.

| Cube Face | Charge per Minute | Max Speed | Effect |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| Grapes | 1 | 30 ft | Keeps out gases, wind, etc. |
| Vines | 2 | 20 ft | Keeps out non-living matter |
| Sundial | 3 | 15 ft | Keeps out living matter |
| Isis | 4 | 10 ft | Keeps out magic |
| Gate | 6 | 10 ft | Keeps out all things |
| Pond | 0 | Normal | Deactivates |

Martin's jaw dropped as he learned what *the Wurfel Kraft* could do.¹⁵⁰

"Kazrack, for you something special," Chochokpi said, as a branch way up near the top of the tree came slowly drooping down. At the end of it dangled a silvery halberd with a wicked looking jagged point at the top. "For you, *Beáth-agh*."¹⁵¹

Kazrack bowed low in thanks.

"And now, hrm, hom... we come to the things whose owners have not arrived to take from me as was entrusted," Chochokpi said, his voice gurgling with dew. "What would you have me do with them?"

"While we do not seek to take your generosity for granted for giving us aid we have not yet asked for, I believe Kazrack is right," Martin said. "If the items must be returned to you to avoid the chonal distortions you spoke of, then you should entrust them to us, or to the companions who are here in place of those you first met. If you trusted in our band before, then I must ask that you do so again, for it is the only band we know now."

Chochokpi took a long time before replying, and when he did another branch came drooping down from way up on the tree. Upon it was fastened a long sword of shining mithral. "This was to be Jeremy's," the tree said. "It is *the Left Blade of Arofel*."¹⁵²

After a brief discussion the sword was entrusted to Dorn, who had no magical arms.

Another branch came whipping around from the other side of the great tree and from it gently hung a sturdy purple robe with gold trim on the cuffs, hem and hood. "This was to be Sebastian's, or maybe it was...hrm... hmmm... Yes, Jana.... The other had nothing... Nothing at all... It is the *Robe of the Wayfarer*."¹⁵³

The cube has 36 charges per day. Each effect costs a certain number of charges to maintain for every minute (or portion thereof) it is in operation. When *the Wurfel Kraft* is active, attacks of the relevant type dealing more than 30 points of damage drain 1 charge for every 10 points of damage beyond 30 that they deal. Spells that affect the integrity of the screen also drain extra charges. These spells (which must be determined by experience or experimentation) cannot be cast into or out of the cube.

¹⁵⁰ **DM's Note:** I gave each player the card describing the magical item and said they can assume anything about how its history and how it functioned was explained by Chochokpi.

¹⁵¹ The name of this mysterious weapon can be translated from dwarven to mean "*Steadfast Daughter of the Gods*." Crafted from the finest shining steel and the incredibly rare ironwood of northern Derome-Delem, the actual origins of this halberd are unknown, though it is obviously of dwarven make as it holds the runic names of the dwarven gods. The name of Krauchaar is on the blade, Rivkanal's is on the handle; the name of Lehrothronar is on the butt end; and the name of Natan-Ahb is on the piercing blade. Hodenar's name is carved into where the metal head joins with the wooden haft. *Beáth-agh* is a halberd +2, *fiendbane*. On a successful hit against a fiend of any kind, it does an additional +2d6 points of damage; this bonus damage is never multiplied with a critical hit. In addition, when used as a piercing weapon, the head thrusts out of its own accord on a successful critical hit, doing an additional +1d6 points of damage.

¹⁵² This fine long sword is made of *truesilver* and sparkles as such, and has a hilt made of dwarven iron-gold. It is inscribed immediately above the hilt with elven runes. One of a pair of swords used by the elfin-hero Arofel during the Troll Wars of the Second Age, it is said that this blade has more powers when used in conjunction with its sister-sword, *the Right Blade of Arofel* (which is a short sword). In addition, legend has it that in the "right hands" the sword has an additional power. The *Left Blade of Arofel* is a *long sword* +2. It has an additional power that is not evident by common usage. When used in conjunction with *the Right Blade of Arofel*, the wielder is considered to have the Two Weapon Defense feat.

¹⁵³ This sturdy purple robe bears gold trim on the cuffs, hem and hood. It is lined with the finest silk, and has many, many pockets on the inside. Each of the pockets is marked with a sewn patch displaying mundane objects of various kinds. Robes of this kind, while rare, have often been crafted by powerful Wayfarers of Ptah who need to travel light, but must have access to many of the mundane objects the robe provides. By reaching into a pocket marked with a specific patch, the wearer is able to magically pull that object from the robe as a full-round action. The associated patch then falls off and the pocket disappears. These are the common patches found on robes of this kind (a number represents the number of patches for that particular item): 2 daggers, 2 bullseye lantern (filled and lit), 1 mirror (a highly polished 2-foot-by-4-foot steel mirror), 1 pole (10-foot length), 2 coils of hemp rope (50-foot), 2 large sacks, 1 short sword, 1 light steel shield, 1 quiver of 20 flight arrows, 1 case of 20 light crossbow bolts, Bag of 100 silver pieces, Ladder, wooden (24 ft. long), 2 Potions of *cure serious wounds*, Rowboat w/ 2 oars (12 ft. long), Portable ram, 4 weeks of rations (1 patch per week), 3 bottles of fine wine, 2 waterskins (full). In addition, the robe grants a +4 *enhancement bonus* to all Constitution checks for a forced march.

Roland transformed and took the coat. He thanked Chochokpi and bowed his head with gratitude.

“Oh, but I did appreciate your being here, son of Bast...hm, hmm, Yes, I did...” Chochokpi added. “So, I wanted to give you another gift, unrelated to these items.”

He lowered another branch with a small sack attached, withing were two large bricks of *Incense of Meditation*.

The Keepers of the Gate thanked the great old tree Chochokpi again.

“Chochokpi, may I ask, who planted you?” Martin the Green asked.

“Hmph. No one planted me... No...Not yet,” Chochokpi gave something like a laugh. “When I am a seed again the cosmos will no longer be, but when the seed I will be is planted from it shall a new cosmos spring forth.”

The Keepers of the Gate were unsure of how to respond to this.

“And one last thing you did ask of me,” Chochokpi said, stretching a thick lower branch to point out the passage out of the chamber to the left of the way they came in. “The directions to the Key Room. There will be lore to be found in the Library.”

“Thank you, again,” Kazrack said.

“May you always grow towards the sun,” the tree told them as they left.

As they passed through a foyer similar to the one they came in, Kazrack turned to Martin. “It is so sad that a creature of such wisdom and strength would have such addled beliefs.”

“Whatever do you mean, Kazrack?”

“What he said about the end of the cosmos,” Kazrack replied. “There will be no end of the cosmos. The First Mountain shall always stand.”¹⁵⁴

“Let it go, Kazrack,” Martin sighed.

“You cannot say you believe that...” the dwarf began.

“Let it go.”

Outside, the city looked starker in the light of the three dull red suns that hung low in the air and turned about each other with disturbing regularity. The light of the luminescent sea was much brighter, creating a glaring aura that surrounded the city walls. The Keepers of the Gate climbed down the steps on this side of the pyramid, warily eying the thorny bushes flanking them. But no new needlemen appeared.

They paused at the edge of the plaza. Another broad street led to one of the six corners of the city, where they could see a white tower shining in the glare of the sea. The tower was the library Chochokpi had described. There was no sign of undead.

“At least no shadows are likely to bother us in this light,” Martin said.

“Perhaps you should let me use your boots,” Kazrack suggested to Logan.

Logan sneered and shook his head.

Ratchis took point and they began to hustle towards the tower. Logan took the rear this time, with Kazrack, Martin

¹⁵⁴ Dwarven religion has no apocalyptic myths.

and Dorn following the half-orc. Roland, with his great speed in panther-form, prowled back and forth, sometimes going a bit further ahead than Ratchis, and other times lingering behind to watch for any undead that might be following them. But they were able to make it just short of 150 feet of the tower without event. They could now see that a well-manicured park was around the tower. It had a radius of about sixty feet, and its patches of manicured grass and low trees were the only living green outside of the pyramid the party had seen.

More of the green-tinged sinewy zombies, in their tattered togas, spears clutched in their calcified hands, emerged from either side of the broad street, just in front of the park. They formed a crude phalanx and began to march towards the party, blocking the way.

“And so it begins again,” Kazrack said, quickening his pace to stand even with Ratchis as the zombies fell upon them.

“To me!” Martin called, holding *the Wurfel Kraft* aloft. Logan hustled to get near the mage, berating the others to join them.

Kazrack managed to knock aside the spear thrust of the first zombie to reach him, but the second’s weapon found the gap in the arm pit where the greaves and the chest plate were separated by the chain shirt beneath. Dark blood seeped through the links. Ratchis took a nasty wound to the upper thigh and responded with a hacking blow of his great sword, fending the thing off so he could move towards Martin. Though its chest was cleaved open, the zombie still stood, and hurried after the half-orc and struck him in the belly with point of its spear. Ratchis roared as he leapt to the other side of Martin.

Spears came raining down from a nearby rooftop, as another six zombies were lined up to hurl them. Martin cried out as spear bit into his foot, and the zombie that had been chasing Ratchis turned to look at him. Kazrack hurried over and cut the legs out from under it, and guarded Martin.

The watch-mage pressed the side of the cube that showed the vines and a transparent cubic field of blue light surrounded him, the stone cube at its exact center. Ten feet to a side, Dorn, Ratchis, Kazrack and Logan were crammed in there with him.

Zombies broke against the field like a wave, slamming their spears and fists against it futilely.

“I think I’m going to like this thing,” Martin quipped.

“Yes, but how will we get past them?” Ratchis asked.

“Be careful to not touch the field,” Martin warned. “I set it to keep out non-living matter, so these zombies cannot enter, but we can still pass into and out of it. Well, parts of us anyway; weapons, armor and clothing cannot pass through.”

Meanwhile, Roland ripped a zombie that reached him to shreds, tumbling out of the confusion of limbs to rush at another one and then turn away at the last minute. He rushed ahead towards the park. Two of the zombies took off after him.

“Nephthys! Turn these undead aside so that we may continue in our effort to save the free peoples of Derome-Delem!” Ratchis called to his goddess, but the dark energies lingering in this city of the dead foiled him.

“Natan-ahb! Strike your hammer across the worlds and judge these foul creatures!” Kazrack called, but again it felt like the distance was too far.

“We can’t just stay here forever,” Logan complained. “The ones on the roof are climbing down, and there are probably more on the way.”

He could not see from his vantage point, but he was right. More zombies were moving into intercept Roland from either side of the broad intersecting street in front of the park.

“I will move the cube,” Martin said, and pushing on the cube that was suspended in the center of the field in the direction he wanted to go, the entire cubic field slid slowly down the street with the party sliding along with it. The zombies seemed about to scatter, but they re-formed and put their shoulders into it and the cube slowed and nearly stopped.

“These undead are smart,” Martin surmised. “They can improvise. At this rate the cube will run out of charges before we reach the tower.”

“What in the Nine Hells is that?” Logan cried out, pointing up to where the zombies had been throwing spears from. A hulking blue mottled frog-like humanoid came leaping off a roof onto the street. It led with clawed feet, ripping a zombie to shreds as it followed up with long jagged claws that emerge from its forearms. It gurgled disturbingly, as its long black tongue drooped down over its flaccid crusty lips, flicking occasionally against its gleaming fangs. It leapt towards another zombie.

Two of the zombies pushing on the cube moved to intercept their new foe.

“Is it helping us?” Kazrack asked.

“I don’t like the look of that thing,” Ratchis said.

“Many would say the same about you,” Logan quipped.

At the edge of park, Roland was sprinting towards the tower, trying to get around the zombies that came out of the side street. They threw their spears at him. Three spears clattered by the panther, but one struck deep in his rear haunch, slicing through flesh and muscle.¹⁵⁵ Roland yelped as his rear legs scuttled behind him for a moment, as he nearly tumbled out of control. He yelped again, as he saw another of the frog-things leap out of the shadows of an alley on his left and come hopping in great high jumps towards the park.

“I should have just run around them using my new shoes,” Logan said. “Now I’m stuck in here.”

The cube’s progress quickened a bit, as now there were only two zombies pushing against it. The others had joined their brethren in attacking the frog-creature only to be ripped to shreds as well. The thing hopped over the cube and spun in mid-air, landing behind Dorn and reaching through the field and nearly ripped the cohort open.

Martin quickly pressed the side of the stone cube that displayed a garden gate. The field hummed and now held out everything. The cube slowed again.

The frog-thing slammed against the field, croaking furiously, but it could not get through.

“I have an idea!” Martin cried, and in a moment he had Kazrack and Ratchis pushing on the field-wall tipping it over in the direction of the park. The zombies fell back, giving ground, as the frog-thing leapt atop the cube, clawing, croaking and drooling madly.

Roland let out a sigh as he saw the four zombies moving to intercept the frog-thing that had seemed to be coming after him. They cut it off before it reached the edge of the park. The Bastite leapt up into one of the small trees at the foot of the exposed steps that led up to a metal door into the tower; above it were three rows of tiny grated windows. He tried to hide there, eying the frog-thing warily as it tore through zombies with ease.

Suddenly, the metal door in the white tower opened. Out stepped a man with a long grizzled dark brown beard, a chain shirt and leather greaves, a helmet with narrow visor guarding his twinkling green eyes and bearing a shield and warhammer. The man hurried down the stairs.

Seeing that the frog-monster had already dealt with the zombies, Roland jumped from the tree, hustled up the stairs,

¹⁵⁵ **DM’s Note:** The ju-ju zombie scored a critical hit. The result was “Apply Crit Multiplier +1 to Total Damage.”

and leapt past the man through the door, even as it slammed shut. The bearded warrior slapped his hammer loudly against his shield to draw the attention of the frog-monsters as he came down the stairs.

Six more zombies filed out of a side street, moaning their displeasure. But the first frog-thing ignored them, leaping after its companion who had just spotted the bearded warrior. The bearded warrior ran at it and slammed it in the face with his hammer, and then sprung away deftly. The thing's nasty claws ripped through the empty air where he had just been.

The cube moved along a little further, before the new zombies pushed against it again. Kazrack and Ratchis tipped it over again, as the others made ready to jump and keep their balance in order to keep from falling prone.

"Drop the field and head for the tower!" Kazrack advised, as the *cube of force* came within fifteen feet of the park edge. "I will hold them off while you retreat."

"Those things will tear you apart," Ratchis retorted.

"Looks like they're going to get ripped apart whoever *that* is," Logan said, pointing to the bearded warrior who had struck and leapt away again. Unfortunately, the other frog-thing had arrived, and was able to cut him off. The sound of its claws screeching against the man's armor and helmet was nearly eardrum-piercing. Blood bloomed from the man's wounds, as he leapt back again.

Roland crept through a long-ceiling antechamber, to find a cylindrical room within the tower. Steps of white stone circled up to the three floors which were lined with shelves of some kind of strange books that had stone spines marked with golden runes. The runes were similar to those that had been around the portal that led to Topaline. An additional floor was at the top but closed off from the others. The lower three floors also seemed to have doors that led to chambers that must have been built into the tower's thick outer wall. From a door at the top of the stairs on the second floor emerged the strangest creature Roland had ever seen.

It had the body of a chestnut draft horse, broad and strong, but where the horse's neck and head should be was an over-sized human head with a black curly beard, and long locks that flowed down its back and eventually became the coarse hair of its tail. The face had pale skin and bright blue eyes, and it wore a gold tiara with a diamond at the center. Its hooves clattered against the stone floor as it regarded Roland.

"Where is Bastian?" Roland heard a voice in his mind.

The Bastite was taken aback, but finally growled and thought back, "Bastian? Is that Sebastian I passed on the stairs? Oh, that frog-thing might get him and that'd be bad. Can you do something?"

The creature seemed deep in thought and did not respond.¹⁵⁶

Roland looked back the way he came from after calling to Bast to close his wounds, "Can you at least open the door for me?" he asked the strange creature. "I need to get back and help my friends."

"The door will open for you," the creature thought back. "Bring your friends into the library. They will be safe from the slaadi and the zombies here."

Meanwhile, Bastian stood ready to run when the blue slaadi flexed its muscular arms and croaked at him. The red-bearded warrior felt his muscles stiffen as he was suddenly *held*. His eyes moved back and forth in panic, but his legs would not obey, and his shield, though up, could not be moved from side to side. He held his hammer above his head in his right hand.

The frog-monster croaked in satisfaction and began to hop towards Bastian. The other one, having finally disposed of more zombies, noticed how close the rest of the Keepers of the Gate were, and went leaping back in that direction.

¹⁵⁶ **DM's Note:** That was a *stilled silent detect evil*.

Bastian felt the thing's tongue flick across his face and the thing's foul breath as it loomed over him, and suddenly he heard a roar behind him and he could move!

Bastian leapt aside before being eviscerated, and saw that Roland had come through the door and was the top of the stairs. The Bastite had broken the spell that held the bearded warrior, and with another roar called to his goddess again. A beam of *searing light* blasted from the panther's eyes and burned the slaadi in the chest. It croaked in dismay and anger.

End of Session #85

AQUERRA

Session #86

Roland leapt off the stairs and sprinted at an angle away from the slaadi. Again and again, the terrible claws of the frog-creature scraped against Bastian's shield, driving the bearded warrior back.

The others managed to get the cubic field into the park, near where several zombies were being cut through by the other slaadi.

"Okay, I'm dropping it," Martin said, and he pressed the face of the cube marked with a pond. The field of blue light blinked out of existence, and the zombies were upon them. One of the zombies thrust his spear right into Kazrack's neck, driving the dwarf down to his knees from the pain. The slaadi spun around, sensing weakness and drove his claws into the dwarf's side, drawing blood from a terrible wound. It croaked with satisfaction, as it spun around again and leapt up, ripping the head off a zombie. The neck stump gurgled and leaked thick yellow liquid and then body fell over.

Ratchis found himself with two zombies thrusting their spears at him, and he fought to ward off their blows with his great sword. He held them back to let Martin and Logan run for the tower door, and when he saw they were away, he began to back in that direction as well.

"Dorn! Stay with them," he told his cohort.

Kazrack crawled to his feet and just barely avoided another swipe from the blue frog-man. He could hear Roland yowling and growling his *prayer* to Bast, as he drove his halberd between the monster's legs, cleaving it through the thigh and catching the left leg on the way back, flipping the thing onto its back. The dwarf followed it up with a hack to the chest while it still floundered to recover. The blow would have easily killed any man, and even most ogres, but instead the slaadi leapt back to his feet, its strange organs hanging out by sinew and tendon from its cleaved chest. Its innards pulsed and twisted and then seemed to bloom and turn black and fall off, the wound left behind closing as organs could be seen growing back on the inside. It croaked loudly three times.

"What in Lehrothronar's name are these things?" Kazrack swore.

More zombies moved in on him before he could strike the thing again. His halberd clanged against their spears.

Bastian kept backing away and his foe suddenly sprung high into the air landing in front of Logan, who stepped in front of Martin to protect him. The watch-mage kept running, while Roland took the slaadi's respite to hustle over to Bastian in order to heal him. The new-comer looked at the panther warily but allowed it to come over and rub against his side. Bast's healing graces closed the worst of his oozing wounds.

"Thank you," he said, patting the panther on the head. Roland growled a playful warning.

Martin the Green waited at the bottom of the steps up into the white library tower, as Logan leapt back and fired an arrow at nearly point blank into the slaadi's mouth. The frog-thing plucked it out with a claw, carelessly tearing the side of its own mouth open. Bastian suddenly came up behind the thing and smashed his hammer into the back of its bulbous head, bursting it like a crusty blue zit. Yellow, green and blue ichor exploded in all directions, as the bearded warrior sprung away again. The thing leapt to the base of the stairs, cutting off Ratchis who had almost arrived, startling Martin. The thing croaked almost musically and traced a circle on the floor with its foot, but nothing happened.¹⁵⁷

Ratchis charged the frog-thing and thrust his sword into it mouth and tore the top of its head open. He looked down as thing's tongue, eyes and other organs squirmed and exploded, but the wounds were too much for it to heal before its life ebbed away. The half-orc turned around just in time to see the second slaadi come leaping upon him. He cried out as the thing's claws cut open his belly and hip. Kazrack arrived behind the thing, only to get one of its feet in his face, drawing blood. The dwarf drove his new halberd into the thing's belly and swung it towards Logan who let

¹⁵⁷ **DM's Note:** The slaadi found out the hard way what the PCs had already figured out, which was that nothing could be summoned in this pocket plane.

two arrows fly into the back of its soft head. Another blow from Ratchis and it was smeared on the grass like its companion.

Out on the street more zombies were gathering and heading in their direction.

“Come! We must enter the library! Abderus will give you refuge!” Bastian said, his wild beard seemed to grow as long from the sides of his head as his chin. He hurried up the steps, and the metal door opened of its own accord. Roland growled his agreement and hurried in behind him. The others looked at each other and followed.

Martin gasped when he stepped through the antechamber and into the library-proper. He looked around at the shelves and shelves of books, and the tables with scrolls and small sculptures and his eyes went wide. He looked up the steps at the next floor of books and saw the strange horse-man standing there. For a moment, the watch-mage thought it was a centaur, but then he realized the creature did not have the upper torso of a man, just the over-sized head of one.

“You are a shedu,” Martin said.

“Yes, I am,” came soothing baritone in that the Keepers of the Gate heard in their minds.

“Oh! Stop that!” Kazrack complained. “I don’t like it!”

“I am sorry if my telepathy disturbs you,” the soothing voice said again. “But this is the only way I can be sure you will all understand me, as I cannot speak your language, but in the realm of thoughts I can speak and understand anything.”

“I am sorry, strange creature,” Kazrack said, stammering as he half thought half spoke his words. “I did not mean to be rude to one who grants us refuge from the foul undead of this strange city. How do you come to be here? What is this place really?”

“You will have to excuse my dwarven friend,” Roland thought to the shedu.

“The dwarven people are not as skilled with their tongues as they are with hammer and chisel,” the shedu said. “But they more than make up for it in their steadfastness. I am called Abderus, and Martin is correct, I am of the shedu.”

“And who is this?” Ratchis asked, pointing to Bastian. The hairy man had removed his helmet and was pulling off his chain shirt. Thick brown hair covered his face and neck and stuck out from under his woolen shirt.

“This is Bastian,” Abderus replied. “I have given him refuge here as well, but his story is his own to tell. I am sure you have many questions and are tired from your ordeal. Join me in the upper floor above the library for a meal and some rest. I can try to answer everything I can there, and I shall have questions as well.”

The shedu turned and began to clop awkwardly up the circular stairs. The Keepers of the Gate followed, though Logan waited behind long enough to make sure Bastian walked up ahead of him.

“Chochokpi mentioned someone by your name to us,” Martin said. “Or a similar name.”

“That is the great tree?” Bastian asked. He spoke in a soft and even voice that did not match his gruff exterior. “Abderus told me of him, but I had no way to get there safely. As it was, if I had not made it to the library when I did, I would have been killed by the zombies and shadows.”

“Abderus seems like a creature of many talents and some power,” Roland said, transforming into human form. Bastian was startled. “Oh, excuse me,” Roland added.

“He cannot leave the library,” Bastian explained.

At the top of the open steps a narrower set led up to the enclosed floor. It was clear that the shedu was too large to

take the steps or fit through the narrow door above. “Bastian knows the way,” Abderus said. “I shall meet you there.” And with that he disappeared.

”Does he do that a lot?” Kazrack asked Bastian.

“Only when he goes to the upper floors,” Bastian replied.

“There is more than one floor up there?” Ratchis asked.

“At least one more, but I have not seen it,” Bastian replied.

“What makes you think you can trust this creature?” Kazrack asked.

“Abderus has given me no reason not to trust him,” the man replied. “And when I arrived, I was close to death and he tended to my wounds and fed me and has kept me safe these last few days.”

“What are you doing here?” Ratchis asked, now following Bastian up the steps. The others followed behind them.

“Waiting for you, the Fearless Manticore Killers,” Bastian turned and smiled.

“We don’t call ourselves that anymore,” Kazrack replied.

The room above drew another collective gasp. This floor of the tower had long rounded thick glass windows that allowed a commanding view of the city and the luminescent sea that surrounded it. The room had a plush sea green carpet, and comfortable padded chairs, sofas and a divan. A long marble dining table was in the center of the room surrounded by nine chairs and Abderus stood beside it. There was a silver tub behind a large sofa. Metal stairs, almost like a ladder, just off center of the room reached a trapdoor in the ceiling, and beneath it was a wooden rack holding about a dozen bottles of wine.

Ratchis noticed a pack and some other gear on the floor by the divan, upon which was a folded woolen blanket. From one of the chairs came swooping a falcon that landed on Bastian’s shoulder.

“What’s that?” Thomas asked with fear in his little voice. Martin felt chills run down his back as his familiar’s fear washed over him.

Martin the Green soothed the squirrel as he asked Bastian about the bird.

”This is Nikron, my companion,” the bearded man said, as he scratched it beneath the beak.

“Are these the ones we waited for?” the falcon clucked in Bastian mind.

“Yes,” Bastian replied.

“I don’t like the look of them,” the falcon said.

“Feel free to get comfortable,” Abderus said to them. “Put your thing among the furniture where Bastian has been staying, you may use it as you like. I have no use of it. And though I also have no need of food, I hope that this will be sufficient for your stay.”

Abderus nodded his head toward the table and it was now covered with a white linen cloth and held the most delicious looking and smelling food the Keepers of the Gate could remember. There was a whole roasted boar and six glazed ducks. There were braised asparagus spears in garlic sour cream. There were two bowls of steamed crabs, and a horn full of autumn fruits and nuts. There were bottles of wine and pitchers of beer and horns of mead. There was steaming bread with great slabs of fresh butter and tiny jars of multi-colored jam.

Logan, Dorn, Roland and Ratchis immediately fell to eating, thanking Abderus between bites. Bastian joined them.

Martin shrugged and went to slip off *Lacan's Demise*, but remembered its power had not kicked in yet. He left it on and began to eat as well, smiling.¹⁵⁸

"This may be the last good meal we ever have," he said. Thomas leapt onto the table and ran back and forth grabbing nuts and bits of dried fruit and making a pile for himself. Occasionally, he would stop to check and see where the falcon was. Nikron was perched on one of the empty chairs, jerking his head back and forth to take it all in.

"Is this food magical?" Kazrack asked. He watched Ratchis tear a leg from the boar and start tearing huge pieces of juicy meat with his teeth and rubbed his hands together nervously. "I am not sure that I should partake."

"Kazrack, you are being rude," Roland said to the dwarf as he poured wine in everyone's glass. "Come eat. Everything is delicious!"

"Tell us, Abderus, what is this place? Why is it overrun with undead?" Kazrack asked the shedu.

"This is Topaline, one of the ancient hidden cities of the people you would call 'the Mystics'," Abderus explained, his words still echoing softly in their heads. "Like all of the cities of this kind once found in Aquerra, or rather, adjacent to it, Topaline was abandoned because of the foul energies that were seeping into their demi-planes. All of these were created in pockets in the Plane of Void, but the Mystics did not realize that over the centuries, the veils that separated these artificial realms would be perforated. And when, Dralmohir¹⁵⁹ was created in a great explosion, a great piece of its cursed mountain struck the area near the portal to Topaline from Aquerra."

"You mean, the portal we came through beneath the Temple of Bast?" Roland asked.

"There would have been no temple then," the shedu said. "Instead, it was a guarded entrance, for it was one of the last places the Mystics hid. However, the energies of that great cursed stone bled through the portal, and further damaged the veils. The last of the Mystics that could not flee were transformed into free-willed undead."

"So what are you doing here?" Logan asked.

"I guard the lore of the library," Abderus said. "I was one of the last Mystics to survive, and only through great discipline, study and dedication to the gods¹⁶⁰ was I able to be transformed into one of the shedu. You see, of those of my people who survived, some were able to transform themselves into the shedu, but it was difficult. The less patient, or moral, became what you would call 'manticores'."

There was a silence for a time that was only broken by the cracking of bones and chewing of food.

"But the Mystics lived in the Second Age..." Martin began.

"Ah, but some were still hidden in Aquerra as late as the ninth century of the Third Age," Abderus replied.

"But still..." Roland said. "That would make you hundreds of years old..."

"More like fifteen hundred, but much of that I have been here, and time is not as linear here as it is in Aquerra," Abderus said.

¹⁵⁸ **DM's Note:** Since Martin's player missed this session, I ruled that he would take off the ring to partake in what might be the last good meal of his life (and receive the benefits of the *Heroes' Feast* spell). Upon his return, Martin's player pointed out that the seven days of wearing needed for the sustenance part of the ring to take effect had not passed yet. (The benefits of keeping a calendar).

¹⁵⁹ Dralmohir is the kingdom of the undead that was once a dwarven mountain stronghold. It is located east of the Little Kingdoms, on the border of the Principality of Rhondria in Derome-Delem.

¹⁶⁰ 'The Mystics' did not revere the gods, and had no priests among their kind. Later, when their civilization was about to die off, many of their ascetics began dedicating themselves to Powers both for good and evil.

“Yes, we were worried about that,” Ratchis said. “We have a deadline and are afraid it has already passed.”

“You are fortunate to have come at this time of year in Topaline,” the shedu replied. “Right now, the ratio of days here to Aquerra is in your favor, but as autumn approaches, it even up and eventually more days will pass there as pass here.”

“So you are duty-bound to guard the lore of the library?” Roland asked. “For we seek lore as to how to unlock the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze so that we might free him.”

“No, no longer. The length of my promise for that has passed. However, I also promised Hurgun of the Stone that I would guard the Key Room, which is really what you seek. He promised to return to replace me, but it has been nearly two centuries, and he has not returned. Yet, because of my promise I cannot allow you access to the Key Room.”

“If you do not allow us access, it might be that Hurgun will never return, and you shall always be trapped here,” Roland replied.

“I shall have to think on it,” Abderus said. “Others have come here, seeking the Key Room, but I have always driven them away when they would not take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Recently?” asked Ratchis, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Not too long ago, a group of monks came in the company of a devil,” Abderus said.

“A devil?” Kazrack asked.¹⁶¹

The shedu nodded. “Are you sure you will not eat, Kazrack?”

Kazrack pulled on his beard and looked at the food, he could not resist any long and he began to eat as well.

“Why would Hurgun choose to put his Key Room in this foul place anyway?” Kazrack asked.

“He felt this place would dissuade those who would seek out this Key Room from coming here,” Abderus said. “And it is not as if the existence of Topaline is common knowledge. He felt he needed a place to call his Maze back to Aquerra if he were separated from it.”

“Separated from it?” Roland asked. “I was told the Hurgun’s Maze was a nexus of planes.”

“It is an artificially constructed mobile nexus,” Abderus said. “It moves through the planes.”

Roland’s face lit up as he smiled broadly and looked right at Kazrack.

“What?” the dwarf asked.

“I love it when I am right,” the Bastite replied with a wink.

“Let me not disturb your meal with more of this talk,” Abderus said to them, ironically not speaking when he said it, but continuing to use his telepathy. “Allow me to sequester myself for a time so I might think upon this dilemma.”

“One last thing, Abderus,” Martin said. “Would it be okay if I looked through the library’s books? I know you said you defended the lore here, but...”

“You are more than welcome,” Abderus replied. “Though they are not conventional books as you would think of

¹⁶¹ Devils are a hierarchy of fiends that constructed the realms of Hell from the Abyss that surrounds it.

them, but records in the style of the Mystics, and as such without magical aid you will not be able to read the ancient runes.”

“I have a spell that will help me,” Martin replied.

“Then you are welcome to look and even copy whatever you like. There are even some spells you might want to learn,” Abderus said. “But no book may leave these premises, and I will point out a set of books you may not read.”

“I understand,” said Martin the Green.

“So, Bastian,” Roland said, looking to the silent bearded man. “Tell us more about what brings you here. You said you were waiting for us?”

“Not waiting, looking...” Bastian said in a voice like a rustle through autumn leaves. “And then I found out you’d be here, so I found a way of getting here to catch you.”

“And what are you looking for us for?” Kazrack asked.

“I wanted to offer you my help,” Bastian said.

“Well, you must think yourself to be very helpful or else, why go through all the trouble of coming here?” Martin replied.

“You are helping Gothanius, and so, I want to help you,” the man continued. “I heard tales of you as I made my way back to Gothanius, and I knew if anyone could help it would be the watch-mage of Gothanius and the Fearless Manticore Killers.”

“We aren’t called that anymore,” Kazrack said, refilling his mug with mead.

“We are called the Keepers of the Gate,” said Ratchis.

“You said, you were ‘coming back to Gothanius’,” Roland said. “Coming back from where?”

“The west. I was living with a barbarian clan, called the Thorad-klen,” Bastian explained. “They are a peaceful people, well-skilled in the arts of smithing and weaponcraft. I went there when the Orc Skirmishes began.¹⁶² I did not want to fight.”

“You did not want to defend your people in a time of war?” Roland asked, not hiding his disdain.

Kazrack grunted, but Ratchis was impassive. Martin the Green only had the same sorry droopy expression now made into a mask of horror by the effects of the Book of Black Circles.

“I have no love of orcs, and I am no coward, but I found out that the war was not one of defense as the crown and the aldermen claimed, but one of expansion. It seemed wrong to risk so many lives for a wider spot on a map, or more gold in the royal coffers, all the while breaching frontiers that would further endanger the people of the kingdom,” Bastian’s voice grew even softer than normal. “It was wrong.”

“So you abandoned your people instead,” Roland replied.

Bastian looked down.

“What does all of this have to do with us?” Kazrack asked, grabbing an unidentifiable piece of boar bone to suck the last of the meat from it.

¹⁶² In 562 H.E., Gothanius destroyed most of the Fir-Hagre orc tribe and routed any others in the area, taking control of Greenreed Valley.

“The dragon that threatens Gothanius is real,” Bastian said, looking at Ratchis when he said it, and then he looked to each of the others. “And I have learned that there are great bands of orcs that worship and serve her. Slaying the dragon would sow chaos in the ranks of these orcs and lessen the danger they pose to Gothanius. I heard that you all were the group of dragon-hunters hired by the king who were most likely to accomplish this task, so I have come to help you.”

“And how *did* you come here?” Roland asked at the same moment as Martin said, “We have seen signs and heard word of this orc gathering, and we know about the dragon’s role, but slaying a dragon is most likely beyond us, so what are we to do about an entire orc army?”

Bastian chose to answer the watch-mage’s question. “Figure out a diplomatic way to stop it? Isn’t that what watch-mages are supposed to do?”

Martin was silent.

“Our first priority is Hurgun’s Maze,” Ratchis said.

“What is this Hurgun’s Maze?” Bastian asked. “I heard Abderus talking to you about it, but I am not sure I get what it is.”

Kazrack looked at the bearded man slyly.

“It is suffice to say that it poses a greater danger to Gothanius and all of Derome-Delem than any orc army,” Ratchis said. “But I will do anything in my power to stop a war once the problem of the Maze is resolved.”

“The dwarves of Derome-Delem will not allow such an army to travel unchecked,” Kazrack said. “I am sure it is nothing to worry about.”

“This Maze thing endangers Derome-Delem?” Bastian asked Ratchis.

The half-orc nodded. “Okay,” Bastian said. “I will help you with Hurgun’s Maze, if you will help stop the orcs from destroying Gothanius.”

“No,” Ratchis stood. “I don’t think so. No one enters the Maze but us.”

“But Ratchis, remember, Chochokpi mentioned Bastian,” Martin said. “He said someone named ‘Sebastian’ was among our number.”

“The Tree said that?” Bastian asked.

Roland nodded, as Ratchis growled his displeasure.

The pitchers and cups, plates, bowls, and utensils began to slowly disappear as their contents were served or eaten. The Keepers of the Gate sat back upon the couches, doing what they had not had a chance to do since leaving Nikar, relax.

Martin went down to check the library, while Kazrack and Ratchis snored away food-induced naps. Roland and Bastian fell to talking.

Roland had helped himself to two of the bottles of wine in the rack and was pouring them into a pair of silver cups he carried in his pack.

“So, you never told us how you came to be here,” Roland asked after the second cupful.

“When I arrived I was attacked by undead, but luckily I was close to the library, and...” Bastian began.

“You need to back up a little to get to the part I want to know about,” Roland said. “How did you arrive here? In this place? A demi-plane? It doesn’t happen everyday.”

“What difference does that make?” Bastian asked. “I’m not asking you how you got here.”

“Yes, but we are not claiming to have come here in search of you, but you claim that you sought us, thus...”

“I still don’t see how it matters,” Bastian interrupted.

“You want to come along with us? You want us to help you? You want us to trust you, but you won’t tell us?” Roland drained a cupful and poured himself another. “Damn! They snore loud!” He threw a cork at Kazrack and it stuck in the dwarf’s beard. The Bastite giggled.

“That’s right, I want you to trust me. That means if I don’t want to tell you something you have to trust that I have a reason, just like I have to trust your group at their word that going to this Hurgun’s Maze place will help my homeland, and that you will aid me avert the onslaught of the coming orcs.” Bastian took small sips.

“You seem a lot more worried about your homeland now that when you first ran out on them. What changed?” Roland asked.

“I will fight to defend Gothanius against attack,” Bastian said. “I never stopped caring about the people of Gothanius, I just could not in good conscience take part in the massacre of the orcs.”

“Your reticence to speak will go against you when it comes time to decide to bring you along,” Roland said, standing.

“We shall see,” Bastian replied quietly.

Downstairs, Martin the Green had pulled out a pile of books and began to go through them. He was surprised to find that there were no actual pages. Instead, the books were more like boxes with faux spines, and ridges where pages would be. Inside, in nine padded niches, were rounded slivers of stone, like polished jade and covered in tiny markings. There were three small golden runes beneath each niche. Carvings on the opposite side, in what would have been the inside cover, showed pictogram instructions of what was to be done with them. Martin the Green shuddered.

He gently slipped one of the strange green lenses out of its niche and pulled out his lower eye lid with the other hand, and like the instructions showed, he slid it over his eye. Suddenly before him were lines and lines of runes hanging in the air and shining. He could read them and move them with a flick of his eye. He found that the information was not organized in a linear fashion, but information could be cross-referenced by focusing on smaller runes in margins of the rows. Once he got over the strangeness of the mode, Martin sighed with joy as he absorbed reams of spell knowledge and history.

The rest of the day went on much like that. The Keepers of the Gate appreciating the rest while they waited for an answer from Abderus.

Day Three in the Pocket Dimensional Realm of Topaline

Abderus came to them after breakfast (bowls of fruit that awaited them when they awoke) to tell them about his meditations on allowing them to access the Key Room.

“Abderus? I was curious, how do you know about Hurgun and Time Elemental?” Roland asked.

“Hurgun of the Stone spent a great amount of time here researching when he first began to have problems with his Maze,” Abderus said into each of their minds. “You see as it moves through the planes there is ‘planar displacement’, which could lead to dangerous reality distortions and planar bleed. He was convinced he could fix the problem by binding a time elemental into the magical engine of the Maze. By using its powers, he sought to distort time about the Maze to counteract the side-effects.”

“Time is the province of the gods,” Kazrack said, angrily.

“It appears that he pays for his hubris,” Ratchis said.

“And we shall save him from his payment if that is what we must do,” Roland said. He turned to the Shedu, his ringlets bouncing on his powdered forehead. “And what decisions have your meditations brought you to?”

“I shall ask you a question,” the shedu said, and then was silent for a time. The Keepers of the Gate waited expectantly. “I would be failing in the spirit of my agreement with Hurgun if I did not offer some help in freeing him. For what is protecting the Key Room, if not protecting the Maze itself, and if by hindering you I endanger the Maze then my pledge is for naught.”

“Then you will allow us to use the Key Room?” Kazrack asked.

“Perhaps,” Abderus smiled, and his horse body shook. “But I cannot simply allow access with no test of your intent and virtue. So, I shall ask you a question. You can think about and discuss an answer. I shall return to you at dinner, and you can tell me then. Agreed?”

“If it is what we must do, then we shall do it,” Roland said. Ratchis and Kazrack nodded.

“And the question is this: Up in an arm-like bough of Chochokpi is a tiny bird’s nest, clutched in its fingered branches, where a newly hatched bird sits, just out of your sight above you. Tell me, is that baby bird alive or dead?”

“What? How are we supposed to answer that? I mean, how newly hatched? If it broke out of its shell it must be alive...” Kazrack began.

“That is the question,” Abderus said. “Think on it. I shall return for the evening meal.”

And with that the shedu was gone.

“Why do we have to wait until the end of the day?” Kazrack asked. “Why can we not answer it as soon as we have come up with an answer?”

“Perhaps it is more difficult to answer than it seems,” Ratchis offered.

“It is neither difficult nor simple to answer,” Kazrack said. “It is a situational question that is impossible to truly answer.”

Logan nodded.

“Could that be the answer?” Roland asked.

Martin shrugged. “I was never very good at riddles.”

“Doesn’t seem like much of a riddle,” Kazrack said. “A very weak riddle.”

“So what’s the answer?” Logan asked.

“I would say we can’t know, but if we must give an answer, it would be ‘alive’,” Kazrack said.

“Why ‘alive’?”

“If the bird is newly hatched it pecked its way out of its own shell, and thus must be alive,” Kazrack reasoned.

“But what if it expired with its last peck? Hatching and dying instantaneously?” Roland asked.

“Then the question makes no sense, and it is unanswerable, and we give my first answer,” Kazrack said. The dwarf turned to his half-orc companion. “What do you think D’nar?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Ratchis replied.

“I agree with the dwarf...uh, I mean, Kazrack,” Bastian said, standing. “He has reasoned it out well, I think.”

“Your opinion is noted,” Roland said, icily. “I doubt it can be that simple.”

“You have yet to make an offer,” Kazrack said.

“I plan to be patient with my prey,” Roland said, going over to lay on the divan.

The day waned. There was more talk of the question, but the Keepers of the Gate never got very far from the answer offered by Kazrack. After a couple of hours, Martin wandered back down to the library, preferring the company of the books.

Dinner appeared as suddenly as it had the night before, and it was just as delicious, with two twenty-five pound roasted turkeys, and slices of perfect ham topped with a sweet golden fruit that complimented it amazingly. The Keepers of the Gate ate in near silence, just eating and drinking hungrily. Occasionally, Abderus would ask some little question, which they would answer succinctly and then go back to eating.

When the meal was over, and the dishes had cleared themselves, as Roland walked over to help himself to another bottle of wine off the rack, Abderus asked for their answer.

Kazrack spoke up. “I do not think an answer can be given.”

“Oh?”

“But if we must give an answer, we say that the hatchling still lives,” Kazrack said.

“Which is it?”

“Which is what?” Kazrack’s brow furrowed.

“Which is the answer?” Abderus asked.

“It is alive,” the dwarf replied.

“Why do you say that?” Abderus asked.

“Because it had to be alive to crack its shell and it is newly hatched,” Kazrack explained.

“I am sorry,” Abderus deep voice grew sad in their minds. “But that is not a satisfactory answer. I cannot allow you access to the Key Room.”

Roland glowered at Kazrack, and Ratchis let out an exasperated sigh.

“Wait! Just like that?” complained Logan.

“What was the answer then?” asked Kazrack.

“I cannot say,” Abderus replied. “But I shall give you another chance. Tomorrow I will ask you another question and I will retrieve the answer from you at dinner. Perhaps your answer to that one will show me what it is I should do.”

“And how long will you riddle us?” Kazrack asked.

“Who said this was a riddle?” Abderus said, waves of confusion flowed through them as the words echoed in their minds.

And then Roland heard Abderus’ voice continue in his mind, “No one else can hear me right now,” he said. “I would like to speak with you a moment, if that is okay?”

Roland nodded.

The shedu bid them sleep well and then disappeared, but Roland continued to feel his presence in his mind.

“I wanted to talk to you about Bastian,” the shedu says. “There is an item you have in your possession that was meant for him to have. Did Chochokpi tell you?”

“Yes, he did,” Roland replied.¹⁶³

“I wanted to ask you to give it to him,” Abderus said. “If the tree says it was to be his, it might be best to give it to him.”

“But we have not decided if we will allow him to join us, and the robe needs to be returned to Chochokpi in the future,” Roland said.

“I see, but have you asked yourself who are you to change time? Was that not Hurgun’s hubris?” the shedu asked. “I know things are different than how they might have been or in another way of looking at it, the way they never were... But if in some small way you can help align this time with the time Chochokpi spoke of, would it not be helpful? And if Bastian was honorable and trustworthy in some future that may never be, a past only Chochokpi could remember, does it not stand to reason that he is honorable and trustworthy now? Do you not trust your own judgment?”

“A judgment I have not made yet,” Roland said.

“It is still your judgment,” Abderus replied.

Roland was silent for a time, as Abderus continued. “And if you do this, I shall grant you a gift, something to replace the robe that might even be more useful to you.”

“I shall think and pray on it,” Roland said.

“It is all I can ask,” Abderus said solemnly, and then his presence was absent from the Bastite’s mind.

Day Four in the Pocket Dimensional Realm of Topaline

Breakfast awaited them once again when they awoke in the morning. This time it was pomegranates and white grape juice, with steaming hot prune tarts and a bitter hot black beverage that Kazrack took to.

“It reminds me of Kafka,” Kazrack said. “But not as good.”

¹⁶³ See last session.

“It’s coffee,” Roland said, rolling his eyes.

Abderus appeared and soon he was telling them the next question. “There was a man who treated his son like a servant. And poorly at that. He beat him and gave him only the scraps of the fine dinners he would eat himself. He gave his son the worst and most menial jobs and never showed him an ounce of trust, except to say, ‘You are free to go whenever you please. Ask for it and you will get your due inheritance in gold and you may be on your way.’ His son never took this offer. The question is, was this man’s son a slave?”

Logan coughed.

“I shall return with the dinner hour to hear your answer,” Abderus said, and he was gone.

“Well, this one will be much easier,” Kazrack said, turning to Ratchis. “D’nar will have the answer.”

“I will?”

“Is not your goddess concerned with freedom and emancipation from slavery? Who else would know the answer if not you?” the dwarf reasoned.

“As much as it pains me to admit this, Kazrack has a point,” Roland said.

“Nephthys teaches that it is not always easy to see the chains that hold a man in bondage,” Ratchis said. “I cannot look into this man’s heart to know from hearing a story.”

“And so we end up at a very similar place to where we were with the first question,” Kazrack said. “We have to guess an answer because there is no way to reason one with the information given.”

“Well, the essence of the question is, ‘what makes a slave a slave?’” Roland said. “If we can answer that we can give Abderus an answer.”

“So how does the church of Nephthys define a slave?” Kazrack asked.

“The church does not *define* anything,” Ratchis explained. “Friars of Nephthys work in closed networks for as long as it is agreeable to them. There is no codified law. There is no hierarchy in the church for one person to have the power to define anything for anybody else.”

“I do not want to insult your church, D’nar, but...” Kazrack began.

“Then don’t,” Ratchis spat back.

“But you must have an opinion, Ratchis,” Roland brought the discussion back to the matter at hand.

“Hmm, well... If he could leave and he really could take a means to support himself or at least get started in the form of the inheritance then he was free and maybe he only chose to stay out of duty,” Ratchis speculated.

“Nephthys also teaches that friendship and duty are to be honored because they are obligations taken on willingly.”

Dorn nodded.

“Could he not be a mental slave?” Roland asked. “Could he not have been beaten and cowed into submission and his father’s offer was just another means to mock him and ridicule his powerlessness?”

“How can you even suggest that a father would treat his son that way,” Kazrack argued, thinking of his own father back in Verdun. “That is barbarity you are talking about.”

“Even the most cultured civilization has barbarity at its heart,” Roland said. “Worship of Bast accepts and honors

that wildness as well.”

“Great, another religion lesson,” Logan said.

The discussion went on for some time with Kazrack, Roland, Martin and Ratchis taking turns exploring possible examples that might fit the scenario and determining what the answer might be based on that.

By the time dinner came, they were annoyed with the question and with each other and hurriedly agreed on an answer. Roland only agreed grudgingly.

Near bursting from another delicious dinner, they gathered about Abderus to tell him their answer.

“We believe,” Kazrack said. “That the man was no slave. If he could leave then he was free but was bound by a something he chose to take on.”

Roland groaned.

“What?” Kazrack protested. “That is what we agreed on.”

“Yes...” Roland sighed.

“You do not agree?” Abderus asked Roland

“Not really. No,” the Bastite responded.

“This answer will not be satisfactory,” Abderus said, sending waves of disappointment with his telepathic words. “I will be unable to grant you access to the Key Room.”

“Abderus, is this really necessary?” Kazrack asked.

“I am afraid it is,” Abderus replied. “Tomorrow I will ask you one last question and at dinner you may answer it. After that, you will have to make your way back to the portal and return to Aquerra or you will miss your appointment with the Maze.”

“So, we do not need the Key Room to get in, then?” Ratchis asked.

“The likelihood exists that you would not need to, however slim.”

“So the Key Room would make it easier, right?” Roland asked.

Abderus nodded in his own awkward way, not having much of a neck. He left them to their sleep, disappearing again. Martin the Green went back down to study more spells and lore in the library. He was learning quite a bit about portals and other planes. Kazrack busied himself with his king’s men pieces, while Ratchis was mostly bored, practicing his reading with a book Martin had lent him.¹⁶⁴

Roland grabbed two of the last four bottles of wine on the rack and two cups and asked Bastian to join him down in the library’s second floor.

“Are you going to question me some more?” Bastian asked with an almost defeated tone.

“No, I thought I might answer some of your questions,” Roland replied. “I mean, if you are going to come with us to Hurgun’s Maze, it will probably be best that you know everything you can about it.”

¹⁶⁴ **DM’s Note:** Ratchis’ player was able to use a saved skilled point for one rank in Literacy (common) after having started here in there over the course of the campaign, and then declaring he was really buckling down and getting lessons from Martin while in Nikar.

End of Session #86

AQUERRA

Session #87

Day Five in the Pocket Dimensional Realm of Topaline

“Bastian? That robe you’re wearing looks familiar,” Martin said at breakfast. Ratchis and Kazrack shoved syrup-soaked saucer-sized flapjacks into their mouths.

“It is the *Robe of the Wayfarer*,” Roland answered for the bearded man. The gleam of the red suns and the sheen of the ocean gave everything in the round room a stark look. “I gave it to him last night when I explained to him what we know of Hurgun’s Maze.”

“What!?” Ratchis choked out bits of food and slammed his huge fist on the marble table. He stood.

”No point in getting mad, Ratchis,” Roland said. “What’s done is done.”

“How can you make a decision that affects everyone on your own?” the Friar retorted.

“When there is no leader to make final decisions, then anyone in the group’s choice might be the final one on a matter,” Roland explained.

Ratchis stalked out of the room, but Roland would not let it lie and followed the half-orc down to the first floor. The muted words of their heated conversation wafting up to the others.

“I am sorry,” Bastian said, turning to the others. “I did not know that I was being given some kind of privileged information, but now that I know it, I am even more determined to aid you in your quest.”

“It’s okay. This is just something Roland and Ratchis have to work out,” Martin said.

“I will never understand Roland, but...” Kazrack said, turning to Bastian and pointing a fork at him. “I want *you* to understand that if you betray us, I will hunt you to my last breath.”

“I understand,” Bastian said, fighting a smile.

“Oh, and did Roland explain that you cannot use any of the patches on that robe?” Martin said.

“Hmmm?” Bastian looked up from his flapjacks.

“Each patch can only be used once and then it is discarded, but in the future it needs to be given back to Chochokpi in the condition we got it in, or else we risk a paradox, since then it would not be the same as when we get it in the past,” the watch-mage explained.

“Uh...” Bastian was confused.

”Just don’t use the patches,” Martin said. “Trust me, it would be bad.”

Downstairs, Roland continued to badger Ratchis.

“My point is, *you* are the leader. You are. Everyone in the group looks to you for guidance, and Dorn practically worships you, and you’re pretty hideous, so he must really mean it.”

Ratchis stared daggers down into the still smiling Bastite. The half-orc loomed over the petite priest.

“I know that you are resistant to the idea of leading because of your faith and not wanting to tell people what to do,” Roland continued. “But if even the dwarf is willing to listen to the half-orc then you have earned the respect necessary to be a leader.”

Ratchis looked down and his body relaxed a bit.

“I admired your deft use of votes to stall the decision regarding coming here to search for the Key Room, and then your manipulation of them to get us here, which is what I think you wanted all along, but it wasn’t a necessary move,” Roland explained. “If you had told the others to come here, we would have just come here...”¹⁶⁵

“What does this have to do with Bastian?” Ratchis asked.

“Well, since you are unwilling to lead the group in decision-making I made my own personal decision, since I had no leader’s word to go against,” Roland winked. “Look, I am not saying to be a slave-driver, and people are still going to do what they feel they must based on their own faith and conscience, I know I will... But you respect that about them, and that too makes you a good leader.”

“But I am not good with words...”

“When it comes to talking to people, let me or Martin do it, in fact, just let me do it,” the Bastite winked again. “But when it comes to being in the middle of a life and death struggle to save Derome-Delem, chances are if you yell to do something, I’m going to do it. I may be flighty, but I’m not stupid.”

Back upstairs, Abderus appeared with a hearty “good morning” ringing in all their minds. Kazrack grimaced.

“Good morning, Abderus,” Martin greeted the Shedu. “Before you asked your question, I wanted to ask you a few things about specific features of Hurgun’s Maze that I wanted to compare to a vision I had that supposedly took place in the future.”¹⁶⁶

“I am sorry, but I cannot,” Abderus replied.

“Because you are forbidden to tell me?” Martin asked.

“Because I have never been inside Hurgun’s Maze, and thus can tell you nothing of it,” Abderus said, real regret permeating his every telepathic word. “Are you ready for the final question?”

The Keepers of the Gate nodded warily.

“If I offered to show you the Key Room and explain everything about it that I know,” Abderus paused. “Would you be willing to leave one of you behind to guard the library and the Key Room in my stead and take over my duty for however long, knowing that you would not die of old age no matter how long it was, but that the wait might change you irrevocably nonetheless?”

The party was silent in response.

“I shall return at the dinner hour,” And with that the shedu disappeared again.

“Given what’s ahead of me, I would rather stay, but I can’t...” Martin sighed.

“You can’t stay,” Ratchis said.

“That’s what I said,” Martin snapped.

“I was reminding you,” the half-orc replied.

¹⁶⁵ See Session #82

¹⁶⁶ Martin is referring to the vision he had when he first touched the Book of Black Circles in the sunken dwarven temple beneath the Pit of Bones. See session #63

“I would do it, but I honestly fear the loneliness would drive me mad,” Roland said.

“Bastian should stay,” Kazrack offered.

“I would stay if that is what is needed of me to aid you and help Gothanius,” Bastian offered quietly. “And while I think I would be of greater benefit in some other role, what’s a hundred years, give or take? But first, let’s consider the other options. If other options are still open that is.”

“None of us can stay, by accepting these items from Chochokpi we have locked ourselves into a destiny,” Martin said. “We may have to go the Maze without visiting the Key Room, after all.”

“That is absurd!” Roland protested. “After everything we went through to get here? It is out of the questions. If someone has to stay, then someone will stay.”

“Just not poor lonely you, right?” Logan snipped.

“I don’t see you offering to stay,” Roland shot back.

“That’s because I’m not staying,” Logan replied. “But I am not going to insist someone else do so.”

“No one who Chochokpi said he saw in the Maze in the future can stay here,” Ratchis reasoned.

“Well, that leaves either Dorn or Ro…” Martin stopped. “We are being scryed.”¹⁶⁷

The watch-mage pointed out where the scrying sensor was hovering invisibly by Kazrack’s head.

“Great Queen Bast, please claw from our presence this nefarious magic,” Roland cast *dispel magic*, but the sensor was still there.

“Who do you think it is?” Kazrack asked, walking away from it.

“It follows you,” Martin informed the dwarf. He concentrated to determine who was behind the spell, but he was blocked.

“Me? Why me?”

“It could be the undead creature we fought at the gate,” Ratchis said. “It knew Kazrack fairly well.”

“Could Richard the Red scry us here?” Kazrack asked.

“He could, but it’d be difficult for him,” Martin explained.

“It never seemed very difficult for him in the past,” Roland said.

“Very well, I shall go into the library for a bit,” Kazrack said. “Continue the discussion of Abderus’ question without me. You know where I stand.”

“Always,” Roland whispered. “Like a stone.”

“I think you are all taking this too literally,” Bastian said. “You all talk like one of us will really have to stay. We can be *willing* to stay without actually being asked to stay.”

“That’s deceptive,” Martin said.

¹⁶⁷ Martin casts *Detect Scrying* nearly every day at noon.

“Too deceptive,” Ratchis agreed. “That is not the kind of answer or attitude that is going to convince Abderus to let us into the Key Room.”

“I’ll stay,” said Dorn.

He was met with silence.

“I am the least needed to overcome the dangers in Hurgun’s Maze, and Chochokpi did not know me from the past...uh, I mean, future. So...”

“It is very mature of you to accept that,” Roland said to Dorn. “You should be very proud of him, Ratchis.”

Dorn frowned.

“I am,” Ratchis replied. “Not in a fatherly kind of way, but as a friend.” He shook his cohort’s hand and squeezed his shoulder.

“Kazrack, you may return!” Martin called down to the dwarf.

The sensor was gone when the dwarf returned. “It seems like our scryer became bored of your inactivity,” Martin commented.

“Have you come to a decision?” Kazrack asked.

“Dorn is staying,” Ratchis said.

“I would rather not leave anyone behind, but if someone must stay behind it should be me,” the dwarf said. “I am longer lived, and if Dorn did survive, everyone he knows could be dust when he was released.”

“We have already explained why those of us Chochokpi knew cannot stay,” Martin said.

“I mistrust this shedu,” Kazrack complained. “I mistrust anyone who wields such powerful magic and feels it can test us as it likes, making up its own rules.”

“If the gods accepted the shedu into their company there is little we can say against them,” Martin said.

“Not the dwarven gods...” Kazrack mumbled.

“The choice has been made and we are all behind it, Kazrack,” Ratchis said.

“I will defer to your wisdom, D’nar,” Kazrack said, and Roland threw a wink at the half-orc. “However, I promise you Dorn, that when we are done with Hurgun’s Maze, I will come back to take your place.”

Dorn nodded. “If you ever run in to Bones or Flora, please let them know where I am.”¹⁶⁸

A decision having been made, Martin the Green went back to the library to complete his studies and put the final notes together for three spells he had learned.¹⁶⁹

The day went on with preparations for the journey back to the gatehouse and through the portal to Aquerra. They all looked forward to the last great meal Abderus would provide them that night before asking for their answer.

The dinner itself was a whole roasted shark stuffed with crab meat and peppers. There were raw oysters and steamed clams, and huge charred shrimps on wooden spears. The Keepers of the Gate thoroughly enjoyed it and drank a

¹⁶⁸ Flora and Bones were part of Dorn’s former adventuring party. They went their own way in Session #68.

¹⁶⁹ Martin learned *Analyze Portal*, *Scramble Portal* and *Dismissal*, thinking they would be most useful in Hurgun’s Maze.

great deal of wine.

Soon, Abderus appeared.

“Are you ready to give me an answer?” the shedu asked telepathically.

“Yes, we are,” Martin the Green replied. “We would be willing to leave someone behind for the knowledge you offered us. As difficult as it would be, success is crucial, and this would only be the first of many sacrifices I fear we will have to make before this is all over with.”

“I see...” Abderus began. “And who is it that will stay?”

Dorn looked at Ratchis and then to Martin and then stepped forward.

“I will stay and take your place for however long is needed,” Dorn said. “I would say that this is too important to let my own desires get in the way, but the truth is I *want* to do this. I *want* to help, and this may be the best way to accomplish that.”

“Very well,” Abderus replied. “You may ascend into the Key Room, he gestured with his head to the steep metal stair to the level above. I shall meet you there.” And with that, the shedu disappeared.

The Keepers of the Gate found the windowless room was lit only by a widening shaft of light that emanated from the top of a tall round pedestal. It was made of white stone and the thick rounded top was etched with golden runes about its perimeter. It was four feet in diameter. Abderus stood beside it bathed in its light, flicking his tail occasionally.

“Gather around it and place your hands between the large runes,” Abderus instructed. The party obeyed, standing with their face in the light, looking down into the recessed top of the pedestal. From this angle it looked more like a font or fountain, with a pool of blue-green water within it. “Now visualize Derome-Delem.”

Ratchis thought of the beautiful mountains and rivers he had seen in his time in the wilderness, while Roland thought of the white cliffs of Nikar. Kazrack imagined the great dwarven halls of his youth, while Logan saw Alexandra the Lavender’s tower in Bountiful. Dorn thought of the bridge where he lost so many of his friends, while Bastian remembered Greenreed Valley as it was when he would sometimes hunt there when younger.

The water in the font began to cloud over and then it cleared again, showing a topographical view of Derome-Delem from miles above. Clouds wandered aimlessly across the scene.

“Now I want you to think about Hurgun’s Maze,” Abderus said to them in their minds.

“But we don’t know what it looks like,” Kazrack complained. The water in the font wavered for a moment, as did the image of Derome-Delem within it.

“It matters not,” Abderus replied. “Think on it. The lock shall attune to you, recognizing you as beings of Aquerra and it shall appear to you as it would in that realm.”

The Keepers of the Gate filled their minds with the questions, speculation and legends about Hurgun’s Maze they had heard or thought of since first hearing of the place. Martin the Green inwardly traced the rune of Hurgun that he has seen many times while studying at the Academy.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ At one point in his career, Hurgun of the Stone was Aquerra’s most prolific scribe of scrolls, selling and trading them in numbers usually considered rash in wizardly circles. Some of the most common fundamental spell forms still taught in Aquerra today are based on spells of his.

The image of Derome-Delem zoomed in until the oceans disappeared, and the craggy darkness of mountains came into view and then the image shifted. Suddenly there was the form of an enclosed fortress of black stone upon a plain of blood red sand cracked by veins of fire. Volcanoes exploded in the distance.¹⁷¹ The image changed again, and a snaking gray column of cloud flew through an endless blue sky,¹⁷² and then exploded into white revealing a forest of trees that only Chochokpi could dwarf. Among the trees ran a bizarre sight. It was a huge thatched hut that ran atop two great chicken legs. It hopped over fallen logs and stepped left and right past trees and brush deftly.¹⁷³ Suddenly, the view began to shift flying up and away from the trees and wavering until it came back into focus. There was the recognizable great ringed ridge that made Greenreed Valley. The southeastern section was cracked into a great smoking crater. There was a dull red glow visible through the mist. But then the scene changed again, this time it was a pointed spire of coral in a seemingly endless sea, orbited by great schools of brilliant fish.¹⁷⁴ Finally, the form in the blue-green water returned to the vision of Greenreed Valley from above, however something was different. The area of the ridge called the amphitheater was gone, and where it should have been was a great chasm separating the ridge from a raised castle upon an island of stone. It had a jagged wall facing the ridge and four great towers in a zig-zag pattern above it. Each of the towers had stone statue of some kind made to represent one of the four basic elements.¹⁷⁵

“It is opening,” said Abderus. The image disappeared.

Afterwards, back downstairs, Roland cracked open the last bottle of wine in the rack and everyone drank some (except for Abderus, of course).

“Thank you for your help,” Martin said to the shedu. “Will the fortress appear as we saw it when we return?”

“It may take some time for the energies invoked to reach the proper place,” Abderus explained. “So, it should appear just as you return, or soon after, assuming you head back to the gate and through the other side and arrive without delay.”

“Perhaps we should go now,” Kazrack suggested.

“It may be unwise to try the streets at night,” Abderus warned. “There are worse things than shadows out there.”

“Thank you for everything,” Ratchis said.

As the Keepers of the Gate settled down for the night, Roland heard Abderus telepathic voice instructing him to a hidden niche in the library. There, the Bastite found a ring of plated white gold and set with five shining white diamonds.

“It is the gift I promised you,” Abderus said. “It is called the *Ring of Alacrity* and it will work for you even when you have taken your feline form.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ This is the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze when it is in Hell.

¹⁷² This is the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze when it is on the Elemental Plane of Air.

¹⁷³ This is the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze when it is on an alternate prime.

¹⁷⁴ This is the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze when it is on the Elemental Plane of Water.

¹⁷⁵ **DM’s Note:** Allowed the players some time to copy an incomplete map of what the fortress looked like, but explained it would be the only time they would get to see the original, so they should make as good a map as they could. This represented the PCs making the best map they could from what they remembered of the vision of the place. I don’t have the map they created, perhaps one of the players still does and we can get it scanned.

¹⁷⁶ Made of plated white gold and set with five shining white diamonds, this ring was crafted to be used as a wedding band by the famous bard Cassavetes of the Neergaardian Court. The ring itself was lost in Derome-Delem, when the bard and some of his Abeodan kin sought to take an overland route to its western shore. The ring was often mimicked, but never exactly duplicated, though over the centuries many have claimed to have the actual one. This ring enables the wearer to move and attack normally while worn. even under the influence of magic that usually impedes movement, such as paralysis, solid fog, slow, and web. The subject automatically succeeds on any grapple check made to resist a grapple attempt, as well as on grapple checks or Escape Artist checks made to escape a grapple or a pin. The ring also allows the subject to move and attack normally while underwater,

Roland thanked the shedu profusely.

Day Six in the Pocket Dimensional Realm of Topaline

“Where will you go now, Abderus?” Martin the Green asked, as the Keepers of the Gate made ready to leave and give their good-byes to both the shedu and to Dorn.

“Go? Where would I go?”

“Is not Dorn taking your place?” the watch-mage asked.

“No, no... I would never lay such a burden on another,” the shedu said. “It would not be proper. I just needed you to believe that someone would have to stay.”

“I see,” Martin nodded. Kazrack grunted his disapproval.

“Good luck, and if you can, please send Hurgun to me,” Abderus said to Ratchis, Roland, Kazrack, Martin, Logan and Dorn.

A long debate the night before about how to travel the streets of the abandoned city back to the gate boiled down to the Keepers of the Gate jogging while Kazrack ran to keep up. The *Wurfel Kraft* would be saved for an emergency, as it did not seem very conducive to escape. Topaline’s three suns seemed hotter on this day and sweat clung to their bodies as they jogged. Roland panting in panther-form. They nearly made it to the gatehouse unmolested, but as they crossed an open courtyard beneath the outer wall, five of the strange green-hued zombies came rushing out of the side streets to block their way, while three more moved in front of the gate that led from the street to the gatehouse courtyard.

Bastian grunted as he felt a spear bite into his side from a narrow, darkened street. He spun around to see exactly where the spear came from just as the zombies before the group charged into their midst. The bearded warrior felt his chainshirt turn most of the blow to his back, but he could already feel the bruise developing as he was knocked face first to the ground.

Roaring, Kazrack charged past the attacking zombies, hurrying towards the ones at the gate. Ratchis cut one down easily, while Roland clawed ineffectually at another.

“*Immobiliarum Necrorum!*” Martin chanted, crushing a bit of sulfur and half a clove of garlic in his hand. The four remaining zombies froze in place, but two more joined the fray from each side. “Ignore the frozen ones! Attacking them will break the spell!”

Ratchis cleaved into one of the arriving zombies and drove it to the ground, where it struggled to get back up. Bastian rolled up to his feet and then spoke in words that Roland and Martin recognized as dwarvish, “Fire! Send me some of your essence!” A flame the size and brightness of a torch appeared in his right hand. He threw it at a zombie, but it ducked, and the flame burst against the ground to no effect. Another flame appeared in the strange man’s hand.

The zombie on the ground sprung at Ratchis, slamming the half-orc in the chin with a hard fist, but the ranger shoved it off and cut its legs out from under it, sending it to the ground permanently.

even with slashing weapons such as axes and swords or with bludgeoning weapons such as flails, hammers, and maces, provided that the weapon is wielded in the hand rather than hurled. Finally, once per day, the wearer may gain a +4 bonus to initiative rolls and Reflex saves for one minute (10 rounds), as an immediate action at the beginning of a combat, but during that time the freedom of movement are lost. They automatically return at the end of the one-minute duration.

Meanwhile, Roland and Dorn had hurried past to support Kazrack, who faced three zombies on his own. The Bastite spun around flanking one of the zombies as he tore out its calf with a panther's bite. Dorn cleaved its head open as it fell, and Kazrack cut down another.

Logan cut down another zombie as flames from another of Bastian's tossed fire licked up its desiccated body. He then ran to join the others at the gate. Martin the Green hurried after him.

The last zombie was hacked to pieces when it was surrounded by the whole group, save Martin who watched the rear, and Logan who climbed up to the top of the low wall enclosing the courtyard, and sat there to help people over. The gate was locked.

"Come on, I'll help you over!" Logan called down.

"I can just use *the First Key* to knock the gate," Ratchis said.

Roland leapt over the wall with one bound and simply pushed the bar off the gate from the other side, opening.

"Hurry! Those zombies will be unfrozen any moment now," Martin warned.

There was 'pop' in the air above Roland and one of the small strange creatures with their over-sized heads, big dewy black eyes, and spindly limbs with over-sized hands and feet that ended in yellowed claws appeared above him. "Noggle! Noggle!" It cried as it clawed into the panther with all four limbs.

"Those annoying things are back!" Logan warned, jumping down off the wall to help Roland. Ratchis kicked the gates open and he and Kazrack rushed in. Dorn followed closely behind.

All it took was one blow of Ratchis' great sword with the increased strength his new belt gave him and the strange creature's head was flying free from the rest of its body, spraying its black oily blood in all directions.

Dorn hurried ahead to check the gate to the passage through the gatehouse and out to the bridge, but found it bolted. He called back to Ratchis to let him know as everyone else came through the gate, Martin closing it behind them. The watch-mage followed this up by casting *mirror image*. Suddenly, there were six images of Martin shifting around and mimicking his actions some slightly ahead, some behind and some perfectly in synch. It was very confusing.

"Martin, why are there so many of you?" Kazrack asked.

"DO NOT THINK THAT SUCH SIMPLE MAGIC WILL FOOL ME!" came the booming voice the Keepers recognized as the skeletal sculptor they had met when first arriving in the city.¹⁷⁷ They looked up and saw it standing up on the catwalk that connected the gatehouse tower. "BUT I AM FEELING GENEROUS AND WILL ALLOW SOME OF YOU TO GO AND NEVER COME BACK, BUT FIRST... THE PRICE!"

It gestured with its boney right hand and Kazrack, Dorn and Roland disappeared.

End of Session #87

¹⁷⁷ See session #84

Session #88

Roland did not remember going to sleep, but this certainly felt like a dream.

Roland found himself sitting before a great pyramid atop a hill covered in lush jungle. The pyramid was made of great golden bricks, and it had outer tiers upon which crawling, pounced, played and slept thousands of cats of all kinds and sizes. He was separated from the pyramid by a broken stone bridge, but the gap was not so great that thought he'd have any trouble bounding over it. He could hear the rush of water echoing up from far down below. But in front of the gap sat a fascinating creature that looked up at him

The creature had the body of a lion, but the upper body and head of a human woman. She had long golden hair, pouty lips, and dark eyes. She was buxom and bare-breasted but seemed to have no sense of shame. She rolled her eyes and licking the side of her paw, brushed it through her locks.

Roland got down on one knee and looked down. He knew her to be a celestial gynosphinx of a high order that served Bast directly.

"Roland Aramesia. You are between moments. You are in the space between where you were and where you will be, and by the grace of our queen and goddess I have plucked you here to give you a message," the sphinx's voice seemed as golden as her hair, but there was a muted sinister echo to it as well.

"Whatever I might do to further the will of my goddess," Roland replied reverently. "I am unworthy of even the slightest bit of her attentions."

"Humility does not suit you, Bastite," the sphinx replied. "But you will have to forget your pride lest it obscure your vision and the scent on the wind. You are involved in weighty matters, but it may fall to you to see what others cannot or will not. The conflicts that brew in the Little Kingdoms may have far more wide-ranging repercussions. And it is not only the forces of good and evil that will be set against each other, but also those of law and chaos, and those are not as easily foreseen. The choices you and your companions make can influence the shape of things to come, whether it is the smothering security of strength or the danger and peril of freedom. Choose well."

"But how will I know?" Roland asked.

"The moment is over," the sphinx said. "A new moment begins."

"AND THAT WAS THE TOLL I EXTRACTED FROM YOU," said the skeletal figure atop the gatehouse. "SO SAYS I, GANTUS - KEEPER OF THE GATE! NOW, YOU MAY LEAVE."

The double doors out to the bridge and out of the city opened of their own accord.

"You will not keep our friends!" Ratchis disagreed, and he ran for the door into the right-hand tower. The others followed.

"*Fire, friend, come to me again,*" Bastian chanted in dwarven as they jogged up the narrow steps to the top of the tower, a small lick of flame appeared in his hand again.

The trapdoor on the right tower burst open as Ratchis leapt out of it.

"You want to die? Then die! *Sagitta Magicus!*" Gantus said, pointing at the Friar of Nephthys, and two arrows of bright light slammed into his chest. But Ratchis was not even slowed, he drew his great sword as he charged,

Martin leapt out of the trapdoor right after the hulking priest and sent two arrows of flame arcing over Ratchis at Gantus, and the undead thing roared as flames engulfed him, sending tattered flaming bits of his robe to fly off on the wind.

Ratchis hewed bone and sinew as he drove the undead sorcerer back with his great sword.

Bastian had made his way atop the tower as well, and ran beside Ratchis throwing his small ball of fire to burst in the Keeper's skeletal face. It shrieked.

Martin the Green cast *Bull's Strength* on Logan as the young warrior hustled past to join the melee.

"SHADOWS OF TOPALINE," Gantus screeched into the air, leaning back broken and pained on the floor. "I RECIDN THE LAWS THAT KEEP YOU FROM ENTERING MY DOMAIN, SO YOU MAY DEAL WITH THESE INTERLOPERS!"

And with that, he promptly disappeared. As two more of the 'noggles' appeared above them. Bastian managed to leap out of the way, but Ratchis caught a claw to the ear.

"Noggle! Noggle noggle!" they cried. But Ratchis ignored them swinging his sword wildly where the skeleton had been a moment before, convinced it was just invisible.

"It can teleport itself, just like it can others," Martin said.

Roland found himself in a ten-foot by ten-foot cell off a narrow hall. He could see a thick oaken door slightly up the hall to the left. He willed himself to shrink down to house cat form, and he slipped like a shadow between bars. Dorn was desperately working to bend the bars of his cell and failing.

"Roland is that you?" Dorn asked the little cat.

"Meow!" Roland agreed

"Dorn! Use your weapon!" Kazrack called from a cell further down the hall, and then came the echoing ring of his flail against the lock. Dorn took his hammer from his side and began to bang on the lock to his cell as well.

"Wait!" Dorn cried between blows. "How did you get out last time?"

"By use of a spell that I was not wise enough to prepare this day even though I knew we'd have to come back through here," Kazrack chastised himself. "Gods! I am a fool!"

"Boy, I bet Roland wishes he could talk now," Dorn laughed.

"Meow! Meow!" Roland agreed.

"No!" Kazrack began to fumble desperately through his overstuffed back. "I just remembered I have a crowbar packed away in here!"¹⁷⁸

The head of another of the spindly humanoids went flying off the tower as Ratchis cleaved it off. And Logan stabbed one that bore a burn mark on the side of its head from Bastian's *produce flame* through the chest, and then chopped it again to make sure it was dead.

¹⁷⁸ **DM's Note:** You know that moment that happens at least once a campaign where you comb your character sheet looking for something, anything to help? This was one of those.

A third creature appeared and clawed at Martin, drawing blood.

“Oh my! Help!” Martin cried. Bastian stepped over and slammed the thing with his shield, but as he brought his hammer around for a follow up blow, the thing ‘popped’ away and appeared atop the watch-mage again. There was a rushing sound and Bastian instinctively dove backward. Green and black flames washed over Martin and the ‘noggle’ lay on the ground charred and shriveled, squealing weakly for a moment before it finally died.

“What the...?” Bastian stepped back.

“It’s okay...” Martin began to explain focusing his will to dispel the arcane flame, but then he saw what Bastian was looking at. Two shadows came swooping down at the bearded warrior, but he ducked and rolled away.

“In the name of Nephthys! Foul denizens of the underworld, I free you!” Ratchis cried, whipping his belt of scored and broken links above his head. The two shadows cackled with delight and spun around to come by for a second pass.

“*Lentus!*” Martin cast, and one of the shadows now slid like molasses against the sky. Logan ran past it cutting it through the middle with his long sword, but it came out the other side to no effect. The shadow reached out and brushed Martin’s cheek and the watch-mage felt just the slightest drain of strength. He ran for the trapdoor and Logan followed.

“Don’t wander off,” Logan called after him.

Bastian was not so fast a second time and he felt the cold touch of the other shadow even as his own weapon passed through without effect.

Having called to Nephthys to bless his great sword, Ratchis felt the satisfying tug on his blade as he brought it through the creature. The temporary magic of his sword had torn at the essence of the creature. He had hurt it.

They came swooping at him again, and again he swung even as he felt their cold strength-draining touch. However, this time the satisfying tug was followed by the shadow dwindling away to nothing. Bastian stepped in close to distract the remaining shadow, putting himself at risk, but allowing Ratchis two more devastating blows that destroyed it as well.

“We need to go find the others!” Martin said, poking his head back up through the trapdoor.

Roland, Dorn and Kazrack listened at the door out of the dungeons, leaving two pried open cells behind them. Hearing nothing, they crept up the hall beyond towards the great chamber Gantus seemed to use as a studio for his twisted sculptures. They listened before entering the room and heard the sound of squeaking metal and a door open from the right side of the chamber.

“NOW TO DEAL WITH THOSE PESKY PRISONERS,” Gantus said, seeming unable to but give voice to his thoughts.

“You should have fled, fiend!” Kazrack cried, charging out of the hall halberd first and shattering the undead’s pelvic bone.

A burst of searing holy light exploded from the tiny black kitten and Gantus shrieked as his bones turned to powder and he was soon nothing more than a pile of dust atop some tattered rags.

Kazrack spit on it and then looked up and around.

“You think there is anything else in here we might need?” Kazrack asked, noticing the creature’s silver diadem with

inset diamond he had just spit on and stowing it in his pack.

“Not unless we need dismembered hands,” Dorn replied.

The three of them made their way through the small door Gantus had come through and found the back side of a secret door at the top of narrow steps that let out on the ground floor of the right tower

Back in the courtyard the others were frustrated by their inability to find Kazrack, Roland and Dorn.

“We should keep looking,” Martin said. “There is probably a secret door.”

Bastian nodded.

“He could have sent them anywhere,” Ratchis said. “Last time Kazrack reappeared in the sky and fell. Maybe it will happen again. Let’s wait and be alert, maybe we can catch him this time.”

Bastian nodded.

“No offense, but I’d rather let him fall,” Logan said. “He’s bound to still get hurt and end up hurting us if we try to catch him.”

“Do what you want,” Ratchis replied.

“There will be no falling,” Kazrack said jovially as he came out of the tower, Dorn and Roland (now back in human form) behind him. “The undead fiend has been destroyed.”

“And we killed the last of his annoying minions,” said Logan. “Let’s go.”

The Keepers of the Gate marched out of the city across the bridge and made their way up to the gold-rune-covered black obelisk on the side of the black rocky outcropping.

“Do we just touch it to go back?” asked Ratchis.

“Allow me a moment,” Martin the Green said, pushing up his sleeves to cast *analyze portal*. Bastian allowed his hawk to take off and circle the island of stone and stretch his wings for the first time since they had arrived in Topaline.

“Hmmm, the conditions and specifics about how this portal works are rather intricate,” Martin said. “But the nature of the rift in the planes in this area has upset the delicate balance of how it works. We should be able to simply return by joining hands and tracing that rune.” He pointed.

“Okay then...” Kazrack said.

“But,” Martin continued. “There is an aspect of balance to how often it lets people through. No one else can go back through until we’ve gone through.”

“So can go through?” Bastian asked. “Because I didn’t come through this way.”

“How did you get here?” Ratchis asked the bearded man.

“I was brought here,” was all he said.

“As long as you go last you should be fine, but no one will be able to come back here until Bastian has passed back

through or someone has reset the portal from this side,” Martin went on to explain.

“That works out perfectly,” Ratchis said. “We don’t want anyone coming back here and trying to harm Abderus to get to the Key Room.”

The Keepers of the Gate held hands in a line, Bastian at the rear, his hawk tucked uncomfortably under his coat, and Martin reached out and traced the rune pronouncing it. Suddenly the strange world of Topaline went away.

There was nothing. Not light, nor sensation of moving, not even a sense of a body. Just cold eternal in all directions. An eternity passed and there was a square of light and the slightest sense of self in a rigid, frozen body tumbling in an inky void. The square grew bigger until the light was all there was.

Suddenly, the Keepers of the Gate felt themselves crash heavily onto a rubble strewn floor. They gasped in harsh air and tried to disentangle themselves, blinded again as they had been the first time through.¹⁷⁹

“Someone turn on a light,” Bastian said.

“You’re blind,” Ratchis said. “We all are. We just have to wait it out.”

And wait it out they did. Less than ten minutes later they were making their back through the caverns and catacombs to the temple of Bast above.

Teflem, the 27th of Keent – 565 H.E.

“Oh! You’re here!” Richard the Red said with real delight as the Keepers of the Gate marched up the narrow hall into the pantry. Razzle was balancing a chair on two legs while he stood with one foot on the back rest and one on the seat. He was repeatedly drawing his rapier and performing some maneuver and then sheathing it again with impressive speed. Cordell looked up from where he was writing in a journal.

“Bastian!” Richard cried when he saw the bearded warrior step out of the shadows of the hallway. “What a surprise! Five go in and six come out! How did this happen?”

Roland looked from Richard to Bastian and his eyes narrowed. Martin the Green dropped his pack and then plopped into a chair exhaustedly.

“You know each other?” Kazrack asked.

“Richard was a frequent visitor to Thorad-Klen when I stayed with them,” Bastian said. “He was a friend of the chieftain and the shaman.”

“Thorad-Klen? That sounds almost dwarven,” Kazrack said.

“It is... Kind of...” Bastian said by way of explanation.¹⁸⁰

“What were you doing in Thorad-Klen?” Martin asked his fellow watch-mage.

“It pays to know all kinds of people, Martin,” Richard winked.

“How long were we gone?” Ratchis asked.

¹⁷⁹ See Session #83

¹⁸⁰ Among the barbarian tribes of Northern Central Derome-Delem, the Thorad-Klen are one of the few that are not nomadic. Instead, they live in an abandoned dwarven stronghold and have adopted many aspects of dwarven culture and language into their own, even though they are human.

“You weren’t gone all that long,” Richard said, scratching under the rings of his auburn beard.

“How long?” asked Ratchis, who dropped his pack to the ground.

“Little less than a day and a half,” Richard replied. The party let go a collective sigh. “I am more than a little curious about what exactly lays on the other side of the portal. Do enlighten us.”

“Yes,” Cordell said, dipping his quill in a bottle of ink. “I will make note of it for the archives of the Church of Thoth.”

“That’s nice,” Roland said, clucking his tongue. “But we can discuss it upstairs.”

“That *paladin* is still up there, dutifully fulfilling the promise he made to you,” Richard the Red said. “It is best we talk down here out of his ear shot. No need for him to know too much.”

The Keepers of the Gate agreed and recounted a fast and loose version of the events in Topaline.

“What do you think that skeletal sorcerer was?” Richard asked Martin.

“I thought it might be a lich, but aside from its ability to teleport people away, its magical power seemed limited,” Martin said.

“You should check the diadem you said you found on it and make it is not a phylactery,” Richard said. “The lich’s spirit might be housed there waiting for a chance possess someone.”

Kazrack fetched the diadem from his pack and a quick *detect magic* allayed their fears.

“And Bastian, how did you get there? Did you take the aid of some fiend?” Richard asked with a wide smile.

“Fiend? No. It was no fiend,” Bastian said with a straight face.¹⁸¹

“Has there been any word from Norena?” Roland changed the subject.

“No,” Richard replied, and Razzle shook his head sadly.

The priest of Bast attempted a *sending* to his fellow priest, but there was no response.

“We can’t waste any more time,” Ratchis said. “We need to go to the appointed spot on the ridge and wait for the proper time. These things aren’t exact.”

“We need to find Norena,” Roland complained. “She has been gone six days and her companions do not seem the least bit upset.”

“Norena is big girl,” Richard the Red said.

“Don’t ever let Norena hear you call her big,” Razzle laughed.

“So where are we going exactly?” Richard asked Ratchis.

“You’ll know when we get there,” Ratchis said.

“I am still not sure we should bring him,” Kazrack said.

“You’re never going to trust me, are you?” Richard asked the Keepers of the Gate with a smile.

¹⁸¹ **DM’s Note:** Bastian’s player rolled the best bluff check of his life.

“Why should we?” asked Ratchis.

“Because I have always told you the truth,” Richard replied without pause.

The Keepers of the Gate ascended into the temple proper, where the Company of the Impervious Ward was still camped. Heriot of the Ironstaff was conscious once again, and she shot dirty looks at Martin as the group made to leave.

“We have kept our part of the agreement and will leave on the morrow,” said Sir Clerebold of Thoth.

“I thought it was the day after tomorrow that you had agreed to leave,” Roland commented.

Clerebold’s fair features grew red as he stood, showing more emotion than he had during the entire combat between the two groups a couple of days earlier. “Do you mock me?”

“No, sir... No, he does not,” Martin the Green said, raising his hands to smooth things over. “Tomorrow will be fine. And it is my sincere hope that this situation does not leave you ill-favored by your order or your god.”

“Either way, there is much to atone for,” Clerebold said, sitting back down.

Outside the winds whipped wildly, seemingly in all directions, wrapping cloaks around bodies and branches about trees. The winds swirled up all the ash that had fallen across the landscape obscuring vision to just under a dozen feet in any direction. Alternately covering their mouths and shielding their eyes the Keepers of the Gate, joined now by Richard the Red, Cordell of Thoth, and Razzle Greyish lined up and began to march south as best they could. Ratchis led the way, planning on taking a wide berth as possible around Summit.

But a little over an hour later, when he was going veer their path more westward, the winds pushed all the ash back towards the valley, revealing glittering autumn sunlight streaming in from the east. It was reaching noon. Scouting far ahead, Ratchis noticed a line of men hurrying eastward down the ridge away from Summit. It looked as if even the last bit of militia left behind were now evacuating in light of the new events in the valley.

“Nephthys, show mercy on those men,” the Friar said aloud, and then hurried back to report what he had seen to the others.

As the half-orc ranger led the group at a hurried pace past the abandoned village, the winds in the valley twisted the cloud of ash into a violent funnel of gray and black. The funnel raised way up into the sky and spread out across the horizon to cover the sun once again. It had gone from day to night, back to dreary day, and soon it felt like night again. Below they could see the area of the valley floor that had once been a steaming mist-covered swamp,¹⁸² and later a jagged rent spewing smoke and fire, explode upward, extending a cone of earth nearly twenty feet high about its perimeter.¹⁸³

“Is everything okay?” Bastian sent a thought to his familiar, N’kron, as the hawk flew way above in circles, and then suddenly began to dive to the eastern ridge edge.

“Danger! Danger!” the animal’s fear coating the back of Bastian’s throat. He instinctively crouched and looked around.

There were cries of alarm as stones and molten earth began to fall about them, setting trees and grass ablaze. Ratchis barely dodged a ball of flame that singed his natty locks as he leapt.

¹⁸² See Session #18

¹⁸³ See Session #78

Everyone began to run as the hail of fire and stone turned into another of ash that turned out to be cold and smell like... snow?

"Things are getting strange," Roland said, and the earth shook.

They pushed on only stopping once to make sure every had drank enough water and to eat some hard tack.

"We are being scryed," Martin announced as they got up to continue.

"At least we know it isn't Richard," Kazrack said, grimacing at the crimson watch-mage.

"It is Mozek!" Martin said, uncovering his eyes from having concentrated to see who it might be. He had seen the warty green-skinned gnome with his white-green hair and smoldering green eyes. He scratched the surface of a crystal ball with one of his thick black claws.

"Lehrothronar! Keeper of Secrets! Block this fiend from listening to our plans and portents!" Kazrack chanted, shaking his bag of runestones.

"Good work, Karack!" Martin said, when he saw the otherwise invisible sensor disappear.

"Who is Mozek again?" Roland asked, creeping up in panther form.¹⁸⁴

"I will never get used to that," Kazrack said, eyes opened in amazement at the talking cat.

"That is what you said about my changing at all," Roland replied.

"Well, I haven't gotten use to that either," the dwarf retorted.

"He is half-demon and half-gnome," Martin said answering the question.

"And he ate our friend," Ratchis said, coming over to hurry them along.¹⁸⁵ The whole valley and ridge still rumbled and shook every thirty minutes or so.

Evening had fallen, and they were in sight of the strange formations of mica atop the ridge when a heavy hail began to fall shooting out of the dark clouds hanging over Greenreed Valley.¹⁸⁶ There were more cries of alarm and pain, and then another great explosion. The rocking of the earth left them all stunned as a column of flame shot out of the valley into the sky merging with the clouds and wind to become a funnel of flame, shooting streaks in all directions.

"Everyone to me!" Martin the Green cried over the din, holding his stone cube over his head. "I will protect us all in the cube."

"Cube?" Cordell stepping over obediently, shield over his head.

"You have an example of *the Worfel Kraft*?" Richard the Red asked, with true amazement in his voice. "Wherever did you get it?"

¹⁸⁴ **DM's Note:** The PCs all went up a level (except for Bastian) after the adventure in Topaline. One of Roland's gained abilities at 9th level was the ability to speak in his human voice while in cat-form.

¹⁸⁵ See Session #17

¹⁸⁶ This is where the party expects the light of the sun to create the beam that points out the way into Hurgun's Maze. (See Session #78)

“It was a gift from the Tree That Grows Backwards,” Martin replied, activating the setting to keep out everything as everyone crammed into one small spot.

“Kind of cramped in here,” Razzle complained, he was crouched down and pressed against Roland.

“The company could be worse,” Roland flirted and winked still in panther-form and flicked his tail on Razzle. The half-elf looked nervously from side to side.

“All of the elemental planes are breaking through at once,” Martin told the others as they witnessed winds rip the funnel of flame apart as quickly as it has come into being. Stone and flying flame battered the blue cubic field, but none came through.

But only a few moments later things had calmed down enough to allow Martin to deactivate *the Wurfel Kraft*, and less than a half hour after that the valley was quiet again as a mist began to rise in it.

“Hey look at that!” Razzle said, pointing to the northwest; to the place called ‘the Amphitheater’. There were over a dozen little fires burning all along top of it; scattered to and fro. “Those are those monks, right?”

“Is that where we have to go?” Richard asked Ratchis.

“No,” the half-orc replied.

“Is this the place then?”

“No.”

“Then why not go there now?” Richard asked.

“Because we have to wait for someone else,” Ratchis replied.

A rudimentary camp was set up and Bastian and Kazrack took the first watch, while Martin, affected by *Lacan’s Demise*, studied his journals and notes by candlelight, preparing for the trip into Hurgun’s Maze.¹⁸⁷ The others all slept, except Richard the Red, who faded from view once again.

Bastian called out mentally to N’kron, “What is it like up there?”

The hawk was flying high above the camp in wide circles taking in the night with its excellent vision.

“The air burns my eyes and my breath,” the hawk replied. “This place is foul. I thirst.”

Bastian summoned his familiar back down to him, and as the bird landed on his shoulder, he sat down took off his helmet and called out in dwarven chanting. In a moment, the helmet was filled with fresh water and the hawk was perched on the side drinking its fill.

¹⁸⁷ Found in the treasure hoard of Gomash the Troll Chieftain (father of the notorious Great Troll Frojack) by the half-elven troll-slaying hero, Arofel. The ring is one of several that were originally forged by Wayfarers of Ptah for the Monks of Anubis, who refused the gift. It is known that one of the rings came into the possession of Lacan Pepper, one of the former Margraves of Thracia, who killed himself after having gone mad from wearing it too long. Rumor says that the ring is also the reason that he died without an heir, leading to his younger brother Ian becoming the Margrave. It is from this event that these rings get their name. How one of the rings came into the possession of the troll chieftain is unknown, but Arofel used it on and off for decades. It was brought into the safe-keeping of the elves] of Aze Nuquerna, along with the *Right Blade of Arofel*. The elves granted the ring to Martin the Green after he helped to save them from the machinations of a rogue member of his order.

The ring is a simple thin gold band with a finely cut rectangular stone. Once worn for one full week, the ring continually removes the need and desire for any nourishment. The wearer need not ever drink or eat, and only requires 2 hours of sleep each night (this providing the benefits of 8 full hours of sleep). If removed, it must be worn again for another week for the enchantment to come into effect again.

“What was that?” Kazrack asked the bearded man. “Something about ‘call to the water’ or something? It sounded like dwarven, but I am not sure I heard right. What was that?”

“It was dwarven,” Bastian replied in his always even tone. “Or at least the dialect of it spoken by the people of Thorad-Klen. It is what their shaman taught me when he showed me his ways.”

”To... To...” Kazrack stammered. “To summon demons? What is a shaman?”

“Well, not demons,” Bastian said. “Various powers...”

“This does not seem right,” the dwarf stood and sulked around the camp doing his watching with a heavy silence

“I am sorry you feel that way,” Bastian said.

Kazrack stormed over. “Why? Why would this barbarian warlock cast his foul spells in the tongue of my people?”

Bastian, who had stood as well to look down at the dwarf, shrugged. “The dwarves taught them long ago. I did not learn that many details of their history.”

“I must ask you that you never cast one of your spells on me,” Kazrack said, holding back anger. Martin the Green who had walked over shot the dwarf a look that said, ‘keep your voice down’. “Even if it is to help me.”

Bastian shrugged again. “If that is what you want.”

Martin pulled Bastian away to talk more about magic, allowing Kazrack to go back to keeping watch.

“So you practice witchcraft?” Martin asked Bastian.

Bastian frowned. “I do not call it that.”

“But you do summon spirits and they imbue you with spells?” Martin asked. “And sometimes they ask things of you?”

Bastian nodded.

”Is that how you got to Topaline?” Martin asked.

Bastian nodded again. “There is a dao... Do you know what a dao is? ¹⁸⁸ I can summon him and through him I was contacted by an intermediary, some power that I was able to negotiate with for transport to the demi-plane.”

“What kind of power?”

“I don’t know,” Bastian said. “It appeared as a pillar of flame in darkness that spoke.”

Martin sighed. “We may have need you to summon a dao again,” he said. “It might have helpful knowledge about Hurgun’s Maze or the planar disturbances in the valley.”

Bastian nodded again.

Logan and Razzle were given the middle watch, and near the end of it, Martin napped the two hours of sleep required of him to prepare spells once again.

¹⁸⁸ A dao is an earth jinn.

Anulem, the 28th of Keent – 565 H.E.

Martin snapped awake when his two hours were up. It was still dark.

“Martin! I went exploring and found some eggs shells!” Thomas was squealing with delight in his mind.

“Thank you, Thomas,” Martin thought back. He scratched his familiar under the head and sat up looking around in the darkness; feeling that just something wasn’t right.

And then it hit him. There was no one awake and watching! Martin the Green stood and looked around. Cordell and Razzle were gone and there was of course no sign of Richard. He woke the others and explained how their recent companions were gone, including Logan.

“Hmph! Logan?” Kazrack asked shaking off sleep and sounding disappointed.

“He was probably still mad at me for hitting him with that spell,” Roland suggested.¹⁸⁹

“More than likely he was in Richard the Red’s employ all along,” Martin said. “Either that or Richard *charmed* him. He does that a lot.”

“But where did they go and for what reason?” asked Bastian in his usual calm demeanor. In a way, he seemed the most confused by the turn of events. “I thought Richard and his companions were your allies.”

“Uneasy allies at best,” Martin replied.

“We knew we were taking a chance by letting him come,” Ratchis said. “He probably figured out enough that he figures he can guess how to get into the Maze without us, and maybe he convinced Logan that he’d be less picky than we are about what kind of behavior he’d tolerate.”

There was a long silence, and a cold pre-dawn wind blew up from the south bringing fresh air with it.

“The sun will be up soon,” Ratchis said. “Let’s move camp somewhere else, maybe that will throw them off, though I doubt it. We can then prepare our spells and then get ready for the first lights. From what we saw in the map room I don’t think we will be able to see the beam of light until the sun is fully above the horizon, but we should get into position, because we can’t be sure.”

“Actually, I don’t think the beam of light will appear until tomorrow at dawn,” Martin said.

“Today is the last day of fall,” Ratchis said.

“But tomorrow should be when the day is equal light and dark,” Martin said. “If I remember my astronomy class correctly.”

Ratchis was silent for a moment. “I think you’re right, but we’ll check today to be safe.”

The Keepers of the Gate began to march further westward, creeping past the open area where the mica riddled the ridge and making for some brush that marked the beginning of the light forested southwestern portion of it.

Light had just begun to appear in the east, and Ratchis was pointing out a small clearing on the southern edge of the ridge as a place to camp, when there was a great disturbance down there as just outside the valley.

They saw a blonde armored warrior hustling with a drawn sword, leaping over brush and making a beeline for the area of the base of the ridge where Roland and Ratchis had waited many days before.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ See Session #83

¹⁹⁰ See Session #80

“Gods damn that pig-fucker and the grubber and the ponce and all of them pansies!” the warrior swore, his voice echoing against the ridge wall. He stopped and looked around. It was Gunthar.

It was then that Ratchis noticed the score of orcs breaking through the trees after the Neergaardian and the great dire boar that charged amid their ranks.

He pointed it out to the others.

“I wish we had had a chance to prepare our spells,” Martin complained.

End of Session #88

AQUERRA

Session #89

Gunthar spotted the approaching orcs and took off eastward once again, about forty feet south of the ridge wall. Black-feathered orc arrows bit into the dirt and into trees around him.

“Can you levitate him up to us?” Kazrack asked.

“He is too far,” Martin explained. “And even if he weren’t it would not help too much to have him dangling in mid-air. I could levitate some of us down there.”

“Invisibly?” Ratchis asked.

“None prepared,” Martin sighed.

Ratchis shook his head. “We need to find a way to get him up here or keep them from getting to him.”

“Illusionary wall of fire?” Martin suggested.

“Do it,” Ratchis replied.

The orcs were all dressed in studded leather armor that looked like it had been pieced together from the scraps of others, but its thick black seams looked like they held it together as strongly as a brand-new set. Some held bows, but others held battle axes and had heavy maces slapping their thighs as they ran. They each had a pack and a bow on their back beneath their purple-dyed hair-woven cloaks.¹⁹¹ Speaking of hair, they had natty locks like Ratchis’ but entwined in purple ribbons. These orcs had coal black face like black orcs and were of a similar stature, but they stood tall and had long legs. Snaggled teeth pushed out from behind their thin black lips. There were more than a dozen now passing the party’s position above them.

The Keepers of the Gate let loose with a volley of arrows and bolts. Dorn watched his arrow pierce the top of an orc’s head and it did not get back up. The rest of the orcs scattered and spread in a line to take in who or what had attacked them, while more than half the group continued after Gunthar.

The great boar that had disappeared for a moment in the shadow of the trees snorted and rushed at the Neergaardian, crashing through the undergrowth and kicking up a cloud of ash.

“*Imago Majorum Igneum!*” the watch-mage chanted and a wall of fire nearly ten feet tall burst into being from the base of the ridge way out into the gloom. The chasing orcs held up, but the boar burst through not heeding it, or perhaps unable to stop. It slammed into Gunthar as the blonde warrior tried to leap behind a tree. His cry echoed up to the ridge as he flopped to the ground. He then scrambled up to his feet and kept on running, zigzagging to keep trees between him and the dire beast.

Roland transformed to human form and began to load another crossbow, as he stood to get a shot, he felt the bite of the first volley of orcs arrows from the bushes below. Though the party was nearly eighty feet above them, the orcs could stand in bushes and at the edge of the treeline sending arrows up in high arcs to land amid the party. None of the other arrows found a target, and Roland crouched back down, as Dorn, Ratchis and Kazrack leaned up out of their crouching positions to send back more arrows and bolts. Kazrack’s bolt found the same orc as his first had and he smiled as he saw it fall.

“Gunthar! This way! Come to us!” Kazrack bellowed.

“I’m going to fly down and get him.” Martin said, his body changing to the now familiar winged draconic form akin to Tanweil’s. Thomas leapt from the billowing and changing cloak and took refuge in a nearby tree.

“You have to protect yourself from arrows,” Ratchis warned.

¹⁹¹ These are the Gu’tarsh, a tribe of orcs that makes an appearance in *the Story of Ratchis*.

“None of those either,” Martin replied. “But don’t worry, I’ve improvised.”¹⁹²

The transformed watch-mage took to the air flapping his small wings awkwardly to get some lift before attempting to swoop down to Gunthar. He was startled as an arrow struck him in the chest and bounced off harmlessly unable to get through his thick lizard hide.

“Looks like we’re having bacon for dinner!” Gunthar quipped as he spun around to slice his long sword across the dire boar’s face and followed it up with the jab of his short sword.

There was a sound like hard rain as a nearly a dozen arrows struck Martin at the command of an orc standing by the illusory wall of fire, but they all fell down harmlessly. Not one was able to harm him. The orc leader was now yelling at the chasing orcs to leap through the fire after Gunthar. They seemed reticent.

“Aim for the leader!” Ratchis commanded, and he, Dorn, Bastian and Roland let arrows fly towards the mailed orc. Only Dorn’s bolt found the target, and it was not enough to drop him.

“Martin! Use the trees!” Kazrack called as the watch-mage awkwardly made his way down, dropping below the treeline to get even more cover.

Gunthar swore as the boar slammed him to the ground again. He barely escaped being trampled as he crawled up on the other side of a thorny bush.

“Oh shit! It’s the dragon guy!” Gunthar swore again, as he turned and saw Martin approaching him. He held his swords up defensively, risking a glimpse at the boar from the corner of his eye.

“It’ssss me, Martin!” the transformed watch-mage said. “Get ready! I’m going to levitate you up and you have to grab on.”

“*Levitatusssss!*” chanted Martin in his sibilant voice, as the boar snorted and charged again. Yellow cracked tusks slammed into Gunthar from the side and the Neergaardian crumpled, his body jerking bonelessly as the beast trod over him. Ratchis had moved over to his left to keep an eye on Martin and sent a couple of arrows at the boar to distract it. Martin grabbed the weightless and bleeding Gunthar and flapped out of the beast’s reach.

The others dodged the rain of arrows that was once again concentrated towards them. Three of the orcs that had stopped before, finally backed up and ran leaping through the wall of fire. The leader leapt after them but fell short, screeching as he scrambled around in the ‘fire’ trying to get up. He dragged himself back to the original side of the wall and patted his body to make sure he was not on fire. Roland and Kazrack laughed.

Infuriated at the loss of its prey the boar mowed down an orc that had just leapt through the fire to find himself not burned.

There was another cry of commands in orcish as another mailed orc appeared in the brush on the right side of the archer orcs. At his command, they all turned their bows at Martin once again as the draconic watch-mage appeared above the treeline and wall of fire with Gunthar in his arms.

The watch-mage struggled to keep any arrows from striking Gunthar and succeeded but lost some lift as his wings flapped madly. And yet despite this and the flurry of arrows back and forth, Martin the Green managed to lay Gunthar down gently beside Roland as the Bastite cheered. His last crossbow bolt had knocked one of the orc leaders backward into the bushes.

“Gunthar is dying and needs to be healed!” Martin told the others, and Roland called to Bast to close the warrior’s wounds. The watch-mage grabbed up his crossbow and began to load it.

¹⁹² **DM’s Note:** Martin was protected by *shield*, *mage armor* and by +6 natural armor from his form.

“Littermate of the blood!” The leader who had been knocked back called up from behind a tree to Ratchis. *“Why be a slave of men when you can serve Scartesh and be free?”*¹⁹³

Ratchis stood and looked down and it was then that he noticed a third set of orcs creeping out of the trees on the far end of where the wall of flame was (for it winked out of existence in that moment) and beginning to climb the cliff face. There was a third orc in a chain shirt ordering them to climb.

“If he keeps the same company perhaps you’ll be lucky to eat the scraps from the ogre’s table! Do you really wish to be food for the carrion-eaters?” Ratchis bellowed his answer.

He was answered with an arrow that bit across his forearm. The half-orc ducked back down and pointed out where the orcs were climbing. Kazrack ran over to intercept them. The dwarf peeked over the side.

“They are staggered as to present less of a target,” he moaned. Bastian moved in beside him and let an arrow go, puncturing the chest of an advancing orc.

“Just what I like to see when I first wake up,” Gunthar smiled up at Roland. “Pussy.” He slowly got to his feet feeling the strain of his recent wounds deep in his muscles. “Got anything for exhaustion?”

Roland called to his goddess once again and Gunthar leapt happily to the edge of the cliff to support the others.

Roland moved to a spot along the cliff edge between Kazrack and Ratchis’ positions and fired his crossbow down at the climbing orcs, missing. However, one of the archer orcs below totally misjudged his shot and ended up striking one of his climbing companions in the back. The orc slid back down the ridge wall crying out in horror and splattered lifeless against its base forty feet below.¹⁹⁴

“Climb! Climb! Climb!” the one of the orcish leaders commanded. A cry from the other and another volley of arrows came over the wall. The third leader to appear was now climbing the wall as well, but about half way up he took an arrow from Bastian in the shoulder and slid back down painfully. Cursing, the orc ran further down the cliff face and began to climb again.

While a few of the climbing orcs were sent plummeting to their death by the Keepers of the Gate, the steady and staggered arrow fire from the orcs at the edge of the treeline allowed a good number to make it near the top.

One threw itself over the edge and leaping to its feet threw a javelin at Martin, but it bounced away as ineffectually as all the arrows had earlier. Bastian dropped his bow and drew his hammer and ran over to slam it on the top of the head of the leader who had also made it to the top by now. The leader fell all the way down and did not get back up again.

“Oh no!” Roland said after he luckily took a moment to get a grip on how the fight was going up and down the line. “Behind you to the left!”

The others looked up to spy a fourth group of about a dozen orcs already at the top the ridge and advancing over the mica-strewn rocks to the east. They swung battle axes over their head and were being commanded by another orc in a chain shirt and wielding a short bow. He barked commands as he sent an arrow towards Kazrack from atop one of the stones in the area.

“If there are even more, we may want to consider disengaging,” Roland suggested. No one listened to him. Kazrack dropped his crossbow and brought his halberd to bear. He took a moment to send another orc plummeting to its death and then moved to cut off the approaching orcs from a spot between two large stones.

Ratchis quickly healed Gunthar twice more in succession and then he and the Neergaardian hurried over to come around the tall stones and pen in the approaching of orcs.

¹⁹³ Translated from Orcish – as is all other complete dialogue between Ratchis and the orcs in *italics*.

¹⁹⁴ **DM’s Note:** The orc archer fumbled, rolling a “Hit Friend” result.

“Outta the way, Stumpy, I’m twice the man you are,” Gunthar said, leaping over a stone to bring his long sword down on the first orc to reach them. The blade rang off the iron helm the orc wore, and its blow was driven off line.

“You may be twice a man, but that still doesn’t equal one dwarf!” Kazrack laughed back. The dwarf caught an orc in the arm-pit with the heavy blade of his halberd, knocking him into the orc that faced Gunthar. A follow-up thrust and both orcs were unconscious on the ground, bleeding to death.

A wave of dyed hair-woven cloaks came over the rocks, and when the approaching orcs saw the armor worn by Kazrack and Gunthar, they dropped their battle axes to the ground and half drew their heavy maces¹⁹⁵ and continued to advance. The other half drew their bows and began to send a steady stream of arrows to arc over the clearing to give their compatriots a chance to arrive.

Ratchis pulled one of the clay vials of the *Blood of Ashronk*¹⁹⁶ from a pouch and pulled the cork off with his teeth, guzzling down the noxious liquid as he used his great strength to parry the blow of an orc one-handed with his great sword. He threw the clay vial at a second orc and then brought his sword into both hands feeling the *aid* of the orc god in his blood.

“*Littermate of the Blood! Drop your weapons and we will not kill you or the soft-ones, but bring you to see Scartesh,*” said a tall orc atop a tall stone thirty feet away. He wore a chain shirt as well, but wielded a long sword and a pick. His hair was as thick and natty, but dyed green, his face was covered by a purple-color disfigurement. “*Except the stonefolk. He belongs to Tish-wash!*”

“*Your bodies will be bloated with the stink of death by evening!*” Ratchis replied.

Tish-wash thumped his chest and then deftly hung his pick from his shoulder and pulled his own clay vial, drinking down the contents.

“Um, Martin? I could use a little help back here,” Dorn called, as he fired his crossbow point blank into the face of a climbing orc that reached the top. But four more were pulling themselves over. Martin calmly walked over and with an arcane word a spray of many colors washed over the orcs. All four of them tumbled backward unconscious, tumbling down the cliff face.

“*Rain of arrows on the lizard man!*” cried one of the orc leaders below when Martin appeared at the edge of the cliff. More than half a dozen arrows came down atop the watch-mage, but not one could pierce his protections. Martin looked over the edge and saw two more orcs coming.

“Go and join the others,” Martin told Dorn. “I can handle this.”

“Good luck,” Dorn replied, and he advanced, firing his crossbow at Tish-wash and striking him dead in the chest. The orc grunted and dropped down off the stone and temporarily out of view.

There was a chaotic mess of flailing limbs in the area around the stones.

Kazrack grunted as he took two arrows to his right side. The arrows punctured his plate and bit deep, and then quickly broke off. He looked up in time to see that Tishwash had snuck around the stone and through the crowd of orcs. The dwarf felt the crunching bite of the orc leader’s pick. Kazrack drove Tish-wash back with a heavy blow

¹⁹⁵ **DM’s Note:** Aquerra uses weapon type vs. armor rules.

¹⁹⁶ These stoppered clay flasks are about four inches wide and six inches tall. Some of them bear the carving of single eye in the center of the lower round portion. These vile potions are created by orcish warlocks. They are said to fill the drinker with the strength and courage that filled the great orcish warriors of old who received their commands directly from the orc god Ashronk. The potions themselves are very potent smelling and tasting. Upon drinking the entire contents of this vial, you must make a Fortitude save (DC 13) or become sick for 1d3 rounds, effectively being *nauseated* for that time. Those of orcish heritage are immune to this effect. Regardless of the success or failure of this save, drinkers gain a +1 morale bonus to attack rolls and saves versus fear effects, and 1d8+6 temporary hit points. This lasts 6 minutes.

from the side of his halberd blade, allowing himself the opportunity to get into a better defensive stance.

Gunthar had made his way into the center of the fray and was leaving a trail of dead orcs as he moved, but was bleeding from many wounds once again.

“Grit-suckers and pig-fuckers!” Gunthar swore, looking around to get a glimpse of Kazrack or Ratchis. “Always running off.”

He did notice that Roland was once again in panther form and was pouncing on orcs and eviscerating them.

Ratchis had run around the fray to join Bastian who was driving a fifth mailed orc back with many blows of his hammer. Ratchis came rushing in and cleaved the orc’s helmet and head open with a single heavy blow.

Kazrack and Tish-wash’s weapon rung out against each other, and time and again, Kazrack’s armor turned the blows of the tall orc’s sword and pick. The dwarf thrust his halberd forward and up, catching Tish-wash’s chainshirt near the collar and jerking it upward. The armor and blade slammed under the orc’s chin and he barely broke off, bringing his weapon back up to a defensive posture. However, he was bleeding terribly where his neck and jaw had been ripped and smashed.

The orcs up top who had drawn their bows dropped them and joined the fray with maces drawn.

Bastian noticed another of the mailed orc leaders trying to pull himself up to the top of the ridge, so he sent him back down to his death with a hammer-blow.

Ratchis moved into the fray and cutting the legs out from one orc, sent it bleeding to the ground, and then thrust the point of his greatsword through the back of another. He pivoted to bring himself near Kazrack and jerked the sword free. Gritting his teeth he brought his sword down on a surprised Tish-wash. The great blade drove down deep between neck and shoulder, driving the orc leader down to his knees, as he dropped his weapon and futilely clawed at the blade for a half a moment.

“*Send the runner!*” he croaked before expiring.

“*Send the runner!*” Another orc took up the cry. It was echoed by a cry down below.

“What are they saying, D’nar?” Kazrack asked Ratchis. He looked up from Tish-wash to noticed only four orcs remained alive up here. No, he saw a fifth running to scrubs east of their location.

“Something about a runner,” Ratchis replied.

Bastian looked over the edge of the cliff, and the orcs below were melting away into the ash-covered trees. The dire boar had run off in a random direction.

The orcs up top made to run, but Gunthar felled one with a javelin before it could get far. A crossbow bolt from Dorn dropped another, and Roland snapped at a third who had made his way to the cliff edge and was about to climb down. The orc tumbled down to his death.

A crossbow bolt and one last arrow from Ratchis dropped the last one before it got too far.

“I did not know the orcs had gotten this close to here already,” Kazrack said.

“They haven’t,” Ratchis replied. “I think this is just a scouting party, sent to scope out the situation and test the strength of resistance.”

“They were camped when I happened upon the filthy pigs,” Gunthar said. He was already dragging the bodies into a pile but checking their cloaks and belts for any pouches with anything of worth. “I killed two of them and ran. I thought I lost them, but that one was a good tracker, I guess.” He pointed to Tish-wash’s corpse.

Ratchis looked at Tish-wash's crumpled form and a sad expression washed over his scarred face.

"Let's search these orcs for anything useful and gather up the arrows, we might need them later," Ratchis finally said.

Roland prowled off, but Bastian and Dorn helped gather the dead orcs and go through their things. The golden center of Ra's Glory was visible above the horizon.

Kazrack picked up Tish-wash's pick and examined it with a frown. He then crouched beside the orc leader and looked at the chain shirt on the corpse.

"Could it be...?" Kazrack stroked his beard. He turned to the others. "These are of very good craft. Could they have been stolen from dwarves? No, they are very good, but they are not quite dwarven."

"Someone else could have learned dwarven craft," Martin suggested. Kazrack shook his head.

Ratchis handed the dwarf a broken tablet of solid gold he had found on the orc leader. It was covered in dwarven runes. Kazrack held it in his palm and rubbed it. He put it away for safe keeping along with several dozen gold obles and nearly twice that many in silver that was found among the orcish leaders. There were also two masterwork bows. Gunthar took one and Bastian, the other.

"Who the hell is Beardy?" Gunthar spat, looking at Bastian.

"This is Bastian. We met him in the city of the Ancients we were forced to journey to in order to unlock the entrance to Hurgun's Maze," Martin said. Bastian put out his hand.

Gunthar spat again. "I'm not impressed," he said not taking it. He looked up at the others. "So, what's the plan?"

"What happened? Why were you delayed?" Roland asked, still in panther form.

Gunthar was startled by the talking panther, but finally replied.

"I told ya. Deebo double-crossed me. He turned into a troll! And then suddenly there were three other trolls and I had to get the hell out of there," Gunthar explained. "I spent days hiding."

Kazrack let out a laugh.

"Laugh it up, Stumpy! I used my head and used some of the smoke-powder to blow them up," Gunthar laughed.

"So you killed them?" Martin asked.

"Maybe. Or it might just take them a long time to grow back their bits," Gunthar replied.

"So what are we doing next?" Kazrack said.

"At this point it is pretty clear that Martin was right and tomorrow is the day we were waiting for," Ratchis said. "So, we find a place to hole up not too far away, prepare spells, and hope we don't run into any more trouble."

"But what about these orcs? Why are they here?" Dorn asked.

"They mentioned a half-orc I know of from when I was young and still with my tribe," Ratchis said. "His name was Scartesh and he was trying to unite all the different tribes under his rule. My tribe would not join with him."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Again, for more about this see *the Story of Ratchis*.

“Do you think he was bringing them together to serve the dragon?” Kazrack asked.

“I don’t think so,” Ratchis said. “At least not back then, or else my tribe just might have joined with him as we... they worshiped the dragon.”

“So your tribe might have joined them since you left them?” Bastian asked.

“Perhaps,” Ratchis turned away. “We need to find a place to camp. I say we go into the woods over there where we can be hidden.” He pointed to the west.

“Why not a place down in valley?” Bastian asked.

“Down in the valley?” Ratchis was skeptical. “We need to be able to get here quickly and with relative ease.”

“But I still think we should find a place down in the valley in case we have to hurry down there immediately,” Bastian said. “I know the area fairly well, and if the orcs come into the valley from the west they’ll be coming right by the amphitheater. We are going to want a staging ground nearby.”

“You can just guide us to a place when the time comes,” Kazrack said.

“Things have changed down there,” Bastian replied.

“Let me check my map,” Martin said, taking his pack off his back. After a few frantic moments searching he looked up at Ratchis. “Did you take the map?”

Ratchis shook his head.

“Richard!” Martin swore.

“Or Logan, or Razzle,” Roland said.

Ratchis sighed and looked at Bastian. “Go scout and see what you can find, but don’t go all the way down. It’s dangerous down there. We’ll head west and you catch up with us, okay?”

Bastian nodded.

The Keepers of the Gate marched westward to where the forested portion of the ridge was thicker, while Bastian made his way north to get a good view of the valley.

The valley itself was quieter, though it belched acrid smoke every once and a while. And Bastian spotted a phalanx of large fire-wreathed salamanders moving through it, and then disappearing as the smoke became a jet of water that roared for a moment, and then all was quiet again. About an hour later he joined the other and described an outcropping of rock was halfway to the amphitheater and gave good cover from above.

As the others settled into camp, Ratchis crept around trying to cover signs of their passage. The spot was protected by three large fallen trees and thick ash-covered growth above and between them. They then all did their best to prepare spells.

“I can use the miracle of softening earth and stone to make deadfalls around the camp,” Kazrack offered afterwards.

“Better to save it,” Martin replied. “If more orcs come and try to climb up the ridge wall you can send them all sliding back down to their deaths with that spell.”

“Good idea,” Kazrack smiled.

Just after noon there was the sound of another crack and explosion from the valley. From where the camp was they

could not see what was happening, so Ratchis crept off through the ash-covered undergrowth to take a look. Bastian sent up N'kron to look as well.

Ratchis was shocked by what he saw. The tiered cliffs of the amphitheater were crumbling. Huge sections of stone were sliding down in wedges throwing up great clouds of dust, and there was a rumbling in the earth. For a moment he saw the canvas tents and other gear of the camped monks go hurling up into the air and then it disappeared into the landside of rock, dust, ash and trees.

He hurried back to camp and led the others to a secluded spot to watch what was happening. The rumbling grew louder as they approached, and they arrived in time to see something huge that rising out of the earth where the amphitheater had been.

"What is happening?" asked Roland.

"It looks like the fortress of Hurgun's Maze is rising up," Ratchis replied.

"Or else the denizens of the Plutonic Realms are rising," Kazrack said.

"I think they'd be quieter," Bastian said in his quiet clipped tone. The others assumed it was his way of making a joke.

"I doubt the monks upon that cliff could have survived that fall," Martin the Green theorized.

"Probably, but we should not make that assumption," Roland said. "I have seen monks do some amazing things."

"Really?" Kazrack was surprised. "All we have seen them do is get defeated by us and then we let them go at Beorth's request, only to fight them again."

There was another nearly deafening crack as the area of the ridge that had been the amphitheater broke away from the rest of it creating a deep chasm. They could now see water bubbling up around the rising fortress.

It took nearly an hour for the fortress to finish rising and twenty minutes later a cloud of dust still hung around it, but it was fairly clear: Where the tiered cliffs known as 'the amphitheater' had been there was now a fortress with tall stone walls, and five staggered towers on the rear wall above the great cracked chasm that had developed between the fortress and the ridge. The towers were so tall they dwarfed the top of the ridge. The four outer towers were square and tiered, with steps running up the side from the battlements below. They were all the same height. While the middle of the five towers was nearly forty feet taller than the others and more like a black metallic tube that spurted smoke. Atop the four other towers were tall stone statues upon stone pedestals that ranged from fifteen to twenty feet tall, but it was still difficult to make out the details of them from this distance.

The rest of the fortress seemed rather like any other fortress with thick lower walls dotted with squat square towers topped with ramparts, and tiered plazas surrounded by outer buildings. The place was quiet and seemed deserted.

"So do we stay here?" Martin the Green asked as the party headed back to their camp.

"Of course," Ratchis replied. "The hope is the beam of light will strike where in the fortress we need to go to get into Hurgun's Maze."

"It looks like I was right and we're going to have to climb down into the valley to get in there," Bastian said.

"Let's see where the beam strikes before we decide what route to take," Ratchis said.

"Okay, but I don't see that we have much choice," Bastian said. He called mentally to N'kron, who told him more of the fortress' layout that the familiar had seen from the sky. Bastian conveyed this to the others.

"So the plan is to see where this beam of light hits in the fortress and make our way there before anyone stops us

without anyone else noticing where it is we are trying to go?” Bastian asked.

The others nodded.

“So who else is looking for this place again?” He continued.

“A half-demon gnome named Mozek, his mother who is some kind of demon-queen, the monks that hopefully all just got killed, and Richard the Red and his friends,” Ratchis said. “Oh, and maybe a warlock named Rindalith.”

“Who’s Rindalith?” Bastian asked.

The afternoon was spent back at camp going over the story of Jana and Rindalith and covering some other details of their adventures that both Bastian and Roland were curious about.

Many hours later as Ratchis, Bastian and Gunthar slept, Roland sat in panther-form, as still as a statue, the perfume of his gifted *incense of meditation* filling his feline nostrils, not quite asleep but in a deep holy trance. Kazrack and Dorn were awake, taking second watch, along with Martin who spent most of his extended awake time reading, and now trying to redraw his maps from memory, Dorn sighed and said, “I guess I am going into Hurgun’s Maze.”

“Are you?” Martin asked, looking up from his book.

“I wasn’t sure, but now...”

“The more hands the better,” Kazrack said. “Only a coward would walk away, or one who feels like the world’s well-being is not his responsibility.”

“I’m not sure,” Dorn said.

“You should go,” reiterated Kazrack.

“Oh, I’m going,” Dorn replied. “I’m just not sure the world’s well-being is my responsibility.”

Ralem, the 1st of Ese – 565 H.E.

In the dead of night, Martin the Green woke the others at the end of the second watch. It had been agreed ahead of time that the party would wake early move to the mica-strewn area and wait for morning there. Martin could get his two hours of sleep while the others watched for the sun on the horizon.

As they marched once again, Bastian pulled up alongside Martin.

“Martin, there was something else I was wondering,” the bearded warrior said. “How come Gothanius has two watch-mages when most places have only one?”

“Hmmm? Two?”

“Richard the Red.”

“Richard is not the watch-mage here,” Martin replied. “He betrayed his oath and thinks everything he does is right based on his intentions regardless of the consequences.”

“Well, he *said* he was the watch-mage,” Bastian said.

“He is not above saying anything for his own advantage,” Martin explained.

At the barren rocky area where the rotted corpses of orcs were still piled, Martin unrolled his bedroll and grabbed his two hours of sleep while the others spread out hoping to get the best vantage point for the coming dawn.

This time of year Ra's Glory rose slightly more south than the rest of year, and soon after the first light came in from the east all the bits of mica all over the ridge top in this area were sparkling as they not had the morning before. Suddenly as a third of the sun came of the horizon, the whole area glistened as sparkles of light leapt from stone to stone and a moment later a beam of light could be seen cutting across the clearing from one stone to another and out into the valley, but it died before it reached the fortress. A few moments later a second stronger beam appeared across the clearing from it, and was reflected into the first beam making it stretch out further across the gulf, but still, it did not make it. Then there was a third beam and then a fourth, and they all focused together to send the beam of light across the valley.

Martin awoke and crawled to his feet to visually follow the beam with the rest of the Keepers of the Gate.

It struck near the top of the easternmost tower, but then began to slowly move to the west. Curious, Bastian stepped out of the clearing to see what kind of the view of the beam others could get from elsewhere on the ridge, and he noticed that even just a few dozen yards away the beam could not be seen. He hurried back to join the others to see the beam of light slow down as it struck the base of the statue atop the next tower in.

"I think there is a door where it strikes," Ratchis said.

"Yes, I think I see it, too" Roland said.

But the beam of light kept moving, this time rising up to strike the statue itself. Down in the valley the reverberation of a lone trumpet could be heard, and in a moment, it was answered by a rising clamor of horns and drums from beyond the unseen western entrance to the valley.¹⁹⁸

The beam continued to point to the statue for half a minute and then the sun shifted again and it was gone.

"We are being watched!" Martin cried; he saw the normally *invisible* sensor of a scrying spell hanging above Ratchis' head.

"Who is it?" Kazrack asked.

"Mozek," the watch-mage said with fear in his voice as he saw the image of the half-fiend gnome behind his closed eyes. Their scaly green-skinned nemesis smiled, and strings of yellow spit expanded from his sharp black teeth inside his impossibly wide mouth. Mozek's gleaming green eyes flashed as he stood from his frosted ball of crystal and climbed a some large purple blur behind him that suddenly came to view. The creature's visage was blocked for a moment as something dark flapped in front of the sphere, but then Martin could see what Mozek had mounted. It was a black and purple scaled wyrm mottled with tarnished copper. It had two legs, a snake-like body, and a sharp black stinger on its long spindly tail. It flew off as the vision faded.

"He is mounting his hell-beast," Martin said, his shoulders sagging. "He is coming."

End of Session #89

...concluded in "Out of the Frying Pan" – Book Four: Into the Fire (part two) -

¹⁹⁸ Roland of Bast was granted the *Incense of Meditation* by Chochokpi in Session #85